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BOOKWAVE

E - MAGAZINE

VOL 1 ISSUE 5
OCTOBER 2026

Stories connect hearts...
One page at a time.

INSPIRING STORIES
Real people...
Real emotions...
Timeless lessons...

THOUGHTFUL ARTICLES
Ideas that touch hearts and open minds...

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Stories, poems, and more... from talented writers...

CHILDREN'S ZONE
Fun, learning and big imaginations...



Where stories find a home, writers find a voice, and readers find themselves.

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EDITORIAL

BookWave E-Magazine Vol. 1, Issue 5 | October 2026

Every Story Has a Heart. Every Heart Has a Story.

Dear Readers,

With immense happiness and gratitude, I welcome you to the fifth issue of BookWave E-Magazine.

Every new issue of BookWave brings with it a special feeling—the excitement of discovering new stories, the joy of sharing meaningful experiences, and the satisfaction of creating something that may touch someone's heart. As we present our October issue, I feel thankful to everyone who has been part of this beautiful journey.

BookWave began with a simple thought: to encourage the habit of reading stories and to bring together meaningful narratives that celebrate bonds, values, emotions, and human relationships. Today, that thought continues to guide every issue we publish.

Life is full of stories. Some are born out of happiness, some emerge from struggles, and others remain quietly hidden in our memories. A childhood moment, a parent's sacrifice, a sibling's affection, a friend's support, or a stranger's kindness can become a story that stays with us for years. Sometimes, we do not realise the value of these moments until we look back at them.

That is the beauty of storytelling. It allows us to revisit our memories, understand the feelings of others, and discover the common threads that connect our lives. A story written by someone we have never met may remind us of our own family. A character's struggle may reflect our own journey. A simple ending may leave us thinking long after we have finished reading.

At BookWave, we believe that stories need not always be extraordinary to be memorable. Ordinary people, everyday experiences, and sincere emotions often create the most powerful narratives. Our effort is to bring such stories to readers and create a space where meaningful writing receives the attention it deserves.

We also believe that every writer deserves an opportunity. Many people carry beautiful stories within themselves but hesitate to share them because they do not have a suitable platform. BookWave wishes to encourage such voices and provide an opportunity for writers to present their creativity to a wider audience. Whether it is fiction, non-fiction, an article, a personal experience, or a travel story, every sincere piece of writing has the potential to find its reader.

Reading and writing are more than hobbies. Reading broadens our understanding, strengthens our imagination, and introduces us to lives and experiences beyond our own. Writing helps us organise our

thoughts, express our emotions, and preserve memories that might otherwise fade with time. When readers and writers come together, stories become a bridge between hearts and generations.

As we move forward, our hope is to see BookWave grow into a lasting home for stories—a place where established writers and new voices can come together, where readers can discover something meaningful in every issue, and where the habit of reading continues to flourish.

This journey would not be possible without the encouragement of our readers, the trust of our contributors, and the support of everyone who believes in our vision. Every suggestion, every shared issue, every encouraging word, and every new reader gives us the motivation to continue.

As you explore our October issue, I hope you discover stories that make you smile, bring back precious memories, awaken forgotten emotions, and remind you of the people who matter most in your life.

Let us continue to read, write, share, and celebrate the stories that make us human.

Thank you for being part of BookWave.

With warm regards,

Editor, *BookWave E-Magazine*

Where stories find a home, writers find a voice, and readers find themselves.

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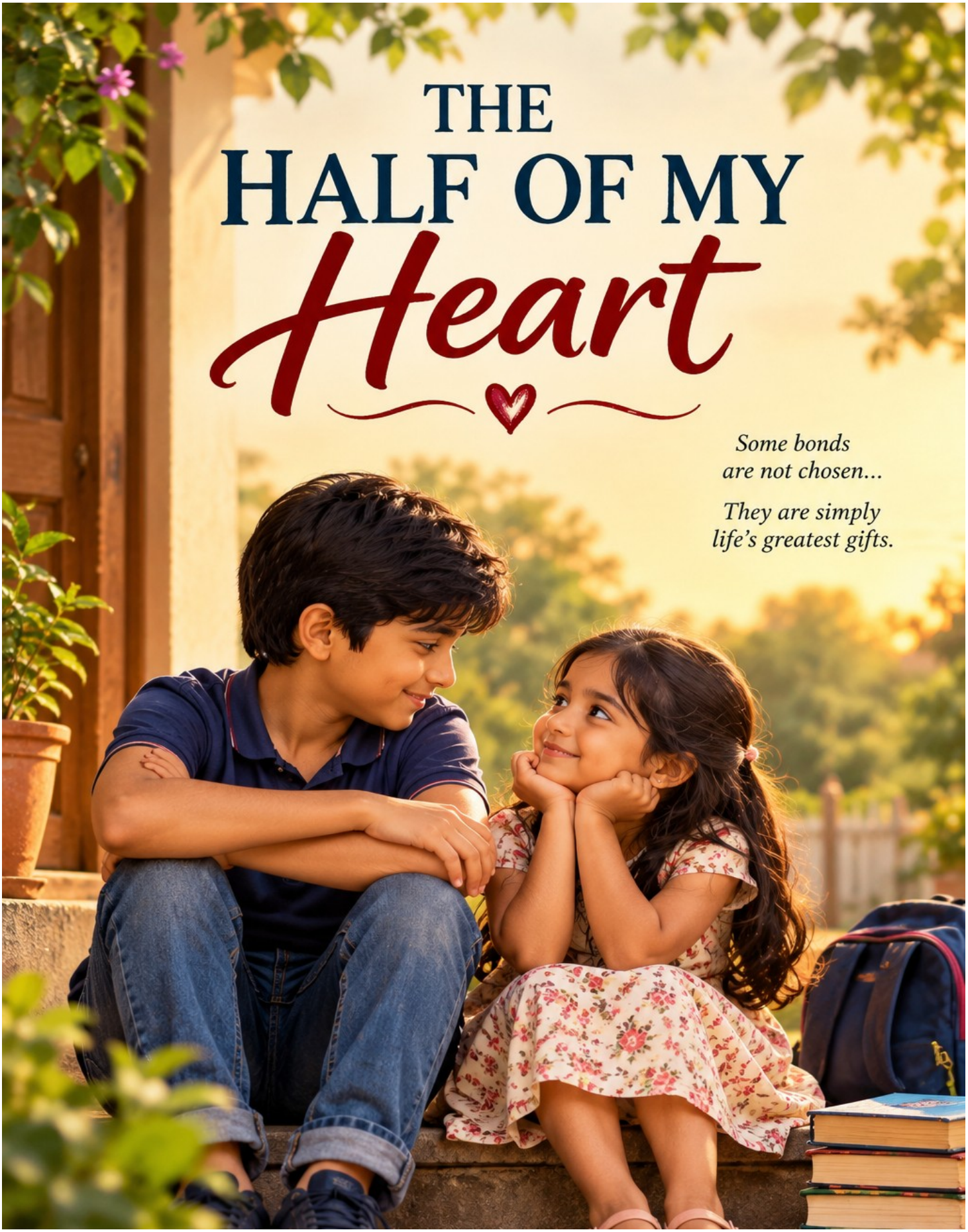
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THE
HALF OF MY
Heart
Some bonds
are not chosen...
They are simply
life's greatest gifts.

There are some relationships in life that begin before we are old enough to understand what a relationship means.

We don't choose them.

We don't build them. We simply grow into them.

A brother and sister are like that. They may fight over the smallest things.

They may complain about each other. They may refuse to speak for a few hours.

They may even spend years living in different places.

But somewhere beneath all those arguments, distances and silences is a bond that time cannot easily break.

This is the story of Prithvi and Archana.

A brother and sister who learned that sometimes love does not announce itself.

Sometimes it quietly waits. Sometimes it sacrifices.

And sometimes, after many years, it comes back and says only three words:

"I was always there."

1

Prithvi was six years old when his parents brought his little sister home.

He had been waiting for a baby for months.

Every evening, he would sit beside his mother and ask,

"When is the baby coming?"

"Soon," she would say.

"How soon?"

"Soon means soon."

"Tomorrow?"

His mother would laugh.

"Maybe."

Prithvi believed that "maybe" meant tomorrow.

So every morning, he would run into his parents' room hoping to see the baby.

Then one afternoon, his father came home smiling.

"Prithvi."

"What?"

"Come here."

Prithvi ran toward him.

"Your sister has come."

Prithvi's eyes widened.

"Really?"

He ran into the room.

His mother was lying on the bed, tired but smiling.Beside her was a tiny baby wrapped in a soft cloth.

Prithvi stood at a distance. He was suddenly nervous.

"Can I see her?"

His mother nodded.

He came closer. The baby was sleeping.

"She's so small."

His mother smiled.

"That's because she is a baby."

Prithvi looked at her tiny fingers.

Then he asked,

"Can I touch her?"

"Very gently."

He stretched out his finger.The baby's tiny hand closed around it.

Prithvi froze.For the first time in his young life, he felt responsible for someone.

"Amma..."

"What?"

"She is holding my finger."

His mother smiled.

"Yes."

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"She likes me."

His father laughed.

"She doesn't even know you yet."

Prithvi looked offended and said, "She knows me."

His mother laughed and replied, "All right. She knows you."

Prithvi leaned closer to his sister.

"What should we call her?"

"We have already decided."

"What?"

"Archana."

Prithvi repeated the name.

"Archana."

He smiled.

"I like it."

Then he looked at the baby again.

"I'll take care of her."

His father looked at him.

"You are only six."

"I can still take care of her."

His father smiled.

Perhaps Prithvi didn't understand what he was promising. But he kept that promise for the rest of his life.

2

As children, Prithvi and Archana were inseparable.

They fought every day. And they loved each other every day.

If Archana touched his schoolbag, Prithvi shouted. If Prithvi took her crayons, Archana complained.

If he changed the television channel, she cried. If she entered his room without knocking, he became angry.

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Their mother often wondered how two people who loved each other so much could fight so frequently.

Both used to play with toys, Most of the times Prithvi explained archana how to play with each toy.

Together they played with soft toys and some times building blocks too.



One afternoon, Prithvi came home from school with a chocolate.

He had received it for answering a question correctly. He sat on the steps outside the house and opened it.

Archana, who was four years old, immediately appeared.

"Give me."

"No."

"Just one piece."

"No."

"Half."

"No."

"Small piece."

"No."

She stood silently. Prithvi continued eating.

Then he looked at her. She was staring at the chocolate.

He sighed.

"Fine."

He broke it in half and gave her the bigger piece. She smiled.

"Why did you give me the bigger one?"

"Because you are small."

She happily ate it.

Their mother had watched everything from the doorway. She smiled.

Children often said "no" with their mouths while saying "yes" with their hearts.

When Archana started school, Prithvi became her unofficial protector.

He waited outside her classroom. He walked her home. If another child teased her, he appeared immediately.

One day, Archana came home crying.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

"One girl said I don't have a nice schoolbag."

Prithvi looked at her bag.

It was old.

Their father had bought it for her second-hand.

"Who said that?"

"Why?"

"I'll talk to her."

"No!"

"Why?"

"She'll make fun of me again."

Prithvi sat beside her.

"Listen."

Archana looked at him.

"Your bag doesn't decide whether you are good."

She wiped her tears.

"Then what decides?"

"You."

"How?"

"By being kind. By studying. By helping people. By being brave."

She looked at him.

"You are brave?"

Prithvi nodded confidently.

"Very."

She smiled.

"Then tomorrow you come with me."

"Why?"

"So I can feel brave."

Prithvi smiled.

"Okay."

And he did.

3

Their childhood passed in ordinary moments. Sharing an umbrella during the monsoon.

Fighting over the last dosa. Studying together before exams.

Watching television when their parents were away.

Going to the market with their mother. Helping their father wash the scooter.

Celebrating birthdays with homemade cakes.

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There was nothing extraordinary about those days.

But years later, those ordinary moments would become the most precious memories of their lives.

Because childhood never tells us when it is ending.

One day we are children. And then suddenly, we are adults.

Once the festival of brother and sister Raksha Bandhan Came.

She tied the rakhi to him

He gave promise that he would be there with her in every stage of life.



Prithvi was eighteen when he received admission to an engineering college in another city.

Everyone was happy. Except Archana. She was twelve.

"You're going?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Four years."

Her face fell.

"Four years?"

"I'll come home during holidays."

"That's not enough."

Prithvi laughed.

"It is enough."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you to go."

He looked at her.

She tried to hide her tears.

Prithvi sat beside her.

"Hey."

She didn't respond.

"I'll call you."

"Every day?"

"Every day."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He put out his little finger. She hooked hers around it.

"Promise."

That evening, Prithvi packed his suitcase. Archana sat on his bed watching.

"Take this."

She handed him a small packet.

"What is it?"

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"Your favourite biscuits."

"I can buy them there."

"I know."

"Then why?"

"Because these are from home."

Prithvi smiled. He put them into his bag.

At the bus station the next morning, Archana held his hand tightly.

"Don't forget me."

Prithvi looked at her.

"Never."

The bus started moving. Archana waved. Prithvi waved back.

Neither of them knew that life was about to become much more complicated.

College changed Prithvi. Not in a bad way.

He became independent. He made friends.

He studied hard. He learned to manage money. He began dreaming about his career.

But something else changed too. He began feeling responsible for his family.

His father was a clerk in a private company. His mother was a homemaker.

Their income was modest.

Prithvi understood that his education was a major expense for them.

So he started doing part-time work. He never told his parents.

He especially never told Archana.

Whenever she called, he smiled.

"How are you?"

"Fine."

"Are you studying?"

"Yes."

"Did you eat?"

"Yes."

"Are you happy?"

"Very."

Sometimes he would speak to her for only five minutes.

But those five minutes were enough to make her day.

Archana grew into a bright student. She loved science. She dreamed of becoming a doctor.

One evening she called Prithvi.

"Anna?"

"Hmm?"

"I want to become a doctor."

"Then become one."

"It's difficult."

"So?"

"I may not get admission."

"You will."

"What if I don't?"

"Try again."

"What if I fail again?"

"Try again."

She laughed.

"You always say the same thing."

"Because you always ask the same question."

She smiled.

"Will you help me?"

Prithvi became quiet and said, "Of course."

He didn't know how he would help her. But he knew he would.

The years moved quickly.

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Prithvi graduated. He got a job in a software company.

His salary was more than anyone in the family had expected.

His parents were proud. Archana was even prouder.

"My brother is working in a big company."

She told everyone. Prithvi would laugh.

"Don't tell everyone."

"Why?"

"They'll ask me for jobs."

She laughed.

"Then give them."

"You think I'm the company owner?"

"No. But you act like one."

They were still the same brother and sister. Only their lives had become bigger.

Then came the day Archana received her medical entrance results.

She had qualified. Her parents were overwhelmed with happiness.

But the college she wanted was expensive. Very expensive.

Her father calculated the fees several times.

He sat silently at the dining table. His face showed worry.

Archana understood.

"Nanna..."

He looked up.

"Don't worry."

"I'm not worried."

"You are."

He smiled and said, "We will manage."

But she knew they couldn't.

That night, Prithvi called. "How did the results come?"

Archana smiled and said, "I got in."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Congratulations!"

She could hear his happiness. Then he asked,

"Which college?"

She told him. There was silence.

Prithvi knew the fees. He knew what it would mean.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes."

"Then don't worry about anything else."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll handle it."

"Anna..."

"I'll handle it."

"But..."

"No buts."

She became silent.

"How much do you need?"

"Anna..."

"How much?"

She told him. He took a deep breath and said, "Okay."

"Can we afford it?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Really."

She smiled and said, "Thank you."

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Prithvi smiled too.

"One day, you'll become a doctor and I'll come to your hospital pretending to be sick."

She laughed and said, "I'll charge you double."

"Why?"

"For being a troublesome brother."

He ended the call. Then he looked at his bank account.

He had been saving for years. He had planned to buy a car.

He had wanted to make a down payment on a small apartment.

He had postponed his own plans many times. Now he postponed them again.

For his sister. He transferred the first installment. He never told anyone that he had given up his plans.

Not even Archana.

Archana got admission in Medical college. Prithvi gifted her stethoscope and white color doctor's apron.



Prithvi wished good luck for her Medical studies.

Days were passing.

Medical college was difficult. Archana struggled during her first year.

The workload was enormous. She sometimes called her brother late at night.

"Anna..."

"Hmm?"

"I can't do this."

"What happened?"

"I studied so much and still failed a test."

"One test doesn't decide your life."

"But everyone is doing better."

"Stop comparing yourself."

"What should I do?"

"Study tomorrow."

"I'm tired."

"Then sleep tonight."

"What if I fail?"

"Then I'll come and fail with you."

She laughed.

"You can't."

"Why?"

"You don't know medicine."

"I'll learn."

She smiled. Her brother always had an answer.

But life was changing again. Prithvi's company transferred him to another city.

Then his father fell ill. The family expenses increased.

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Prithvi began sending more money home. Archana knew something was wrong.

"Anna, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You sound tired."

"Work."

"Are you eating properly?"

"Yes."

"You're lying."

Prithvi laughed.

"How do you know?"

"I'm your sister."

He became silent. She had always known him too well.

One evening, Archana came home unexpectedly. She found her father sitting quietly.

"Where is Anna?"

"He hasn't come."

"What?"

"He went to work."

She looked at her mother and asked, "Where?"

They told her. Archana called him.

He didn't answer. She called again. Still no answer. She called a third time.

Finally, he picked up.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?"

"At work."

"You didn't tell me you were working late."

"I forgot."

"Are you eating?"

"Yes."

She paused for some and said, "Anna."

"Hmm?"

"Are you happy?"

There was silence.

"Why are you asking?"

"Because you keep taking care of everyone."

"I'm fine."

"You gave up buying a car, didn't you?"

He became silent.

"Who told you?"

"No one."

She had seen the old plans on his table. She understood.

"Anna..."

"Don't worry."

"I am not worried."

"You should buy things for yourself too."

"I have you."

She smiled through tears and said, "You are impossible."

"I know."

Years passed. Archana became a doctor.

She joined a hospital as junior doctor. She had to travel to hospital by bus.

Prithvi Made her learn two wheeler driving.

Once she learned driving and acquiring driving license, Prithvi along with her parents, gifter her two wheeler so that she can travel easily to hospital.

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Archana felt her brother’s presence at every stage of her life.

Her first salary came. It was small.

But she came home with sweets. She gave the first packet to her brother.

"For you."

"Why?"

"My first salary."

"You should buy something for yourself."

"I already did."

"What?"

She smiled.

"You."

Prithvi laughed and said, "That doesn't make sense."

"It does to me."

She gave him an envelope. Inside was money.

He looked at her.

"What's this?"

"Your first installment."

"For what?"

"The money you spent on me."

Prithvi immediately pushed it back.

"No."

"Anna."

"No."

"You paid my fees."

"You're my sister."

"That doesn't mean I shouldn't return it."

"I didn't pay because I expected money."

"I know."

"Then keep it."

She looked at him.

"Fine."

She took the envelope. Then secretly put it into his bag.

He discovered it later. He smiled.

Some debts are not meant to be repaid. They are meant to be remembered.

Life took them in different directions.

Archana became a successful doctor and Prithvi became a senior manager.

Both got married. Both had children.

Their parents grew older. Family gatherings became less frequent.

Phone calls became shorter. Messages replaced conversations.

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Responsibilities multiplied. Yet whenever Archana had a problem, she still called Prithvi.

And whenever Prithvi was troubled, he still called Archana.

They had become adults.

But somewhere inside them were still the two children who had shared chocolate on the front steps.

Then came a misunderstanding. It began with something small.

Their father wanted to sell the old family house. The house had become expensive to maintain.

Prithvi thought it would be better to sell it and divide the money.

Archana disagreed.

"No."

"Why?"

"This is our childhood home."

"We don't live here anymore."

"So?"

"Archana, emotions don't pay property taxes."

She became upset.

"You've changed."

"What?"

"You only think about money."

Prithvi stared at her.

"Do you really think that?"

"I don't know anymore."

The words hurt. More than she intended.

Prithvi became silent.

"Fine," he said.

Archana immediately regretted it. But pride prevented her from apologizing.

The call ended. Days became weeks. weeks became months.

They stopped calling. Their parents noticed.

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"Why aren't you talking?"

"Nothing."

Both gave the same answer. But something had broken. Not the bond. Only the communication.

Sometimes people we love most are the ones we hurt most easily because we know exactly where their heart is.

Months passed. Archana's daughter was six years old.

One evening she asked,

"Amma, why don't we visit Mama?"

Archana became quiet.

"He's busy."

"Call him."

"Later."

"When?"

"Soon."

The little girl looked at her and asked, "Do you fight with Mama?"

Archana smiled sadly.

"No."

"Then call him."

Children often say the simplest things. Adults make them complicated.

Then, one morning, Archana received a phone call.

It was from her mother. "Come home."

"What happened?" she asked.

"Your father..." There was silence.

"Amma?"

"Come quickly."

Archana drove home.

Her father had suffered a serious medical emergency.

He was in the hospital. Prithvi was already there.

For the first time in months, the brother and sister stood face to face.

Neither spoke. Their mother looked at both of them.

"Your father needs both of you."

That was enough. Archana walked toward Prithvi and asked, "How is he?"

"Doctors are treating him."

"You stayed all night?"

"Yes."

She looked at him. His eyes were tired.

He looked thinner. She suddenly remembered all the years he had sacrificed for the family.

All the nights he had worked. All the things he had never told her.

Both came beside to their father they looked sad.

He was on hospital bed and looking his children.



Archana felt her brother’s presence little close.

She remembered his contributions towards her medical studies and also the two wheeler he gifted.

And she remembered the words she had said.

You've changed. She felt ashamed.

That night, they sat outside the hospital room.

For a long time, neither spoke.

Finally, Archana said,

"Anna."

He looked at her.

"I'm sorry."

He looked away.

"I shouldn't have said those things."

"It's okay."

"No."

She wiped her tears.

"It isn't."

He remained silent. She continued.

"I forgot who you were."

He looked at her.

"You didn't forget."

"I did."

"You were angry."

"Still..."

He smiled faintly.

"Do you remember the chocolate?"

She laughed through tears.

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"The one you didn't want to share?"

"I gave you the bigger piece."

"You did."

"I was a good brother."

"You were."

He smiled.

She looked at him.

"I missed you."

He didn't answer.

She moved closer and said, "I missed you so much."

He finally looked at her and said, "I missed you too."

That was all. But sometimes two words can repair what months of silence have damaged.

Their father survived. The recovery was slow.

During those months, Prithvi and Archana became close again.

They began talking.....Really talking.....They discussed their childhood.

Their children. Their parents. Their fears. Their dreams.

One evening, Archana asked, "Why did you never tell me about your struggles?"

"What struggles?"

"When you paid my college fees."

He smiled.

"You didn't need to know."

"I should have."

"Why?"

"Because I thought everything came easily to you."

He laughed.

"Nothing came easily."

She looked at him.

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was your brother."

She didn't understand. He continued.

"When you were studying, you needed to think about becoming a doctor. Not about whether your brother could afford your fees."

She looked down and said, "You sacrificed so much."

"Maybe."

"Don't say maybe."

He smiled.

"I didn't lose anything."

"What?"

"I got a doctor for a sister."

She laughed. Then cried.....Then hugged him.

A few years later, their mother also became seriously ill.

This time, the family was prepared. Prithvi handled the finances.

Archana handled the medical care. They worked together.

No arguments. No misunderstandings.

Just two children—now adults—standing together for the people who had raised them.

Their mother watched them from her bed.

One evening she called them and said, "Come here."

They sat beside her. She held one hand of each.

"You both fought so much when you were young."

Archana smiled.

"Amma, he started."

Prithvi immediately protested.

"She started."

Their mother laughed.

"You still haven't changed."

They laughed too. Then their mother became serious.

"Promise me something."

"What?"

"Never let distance become bigger than your relationship."

Neither spoke. She continued.

"Life will take you to different places. Your children will grow. Your responsibilities will increase. You may disagree. You may even get angry."

She squeezed their hands.

"But never let silence stay too long."

Prithvi nodded.

Archana nodded.

Their mother smiled.

"That is all I want."

Years passed again. The children grew. Their parents became grandparents.

Family gatherings became louder. There were birthdays.

Graduations. Festivals. Weddings. And photographs.

In almost every photograph, Prithvi and Archana stood somewhere near each other.

Sometimes their children joked.

"You two still behave like children."

Prithvi would say, "She is still my little sister."

Archana would respond, "And he is still my irritating brother."

Everyone laughed. But the truth was deeper. They had learned something.

A sibling relationship doesn't remain strong because siblings never fight.

It remains strong because after the fight, they find their way back.

Archana’s daughter marriage fixed. They get invitation cards received.

She wanted her brother to take responsibility for one important part of the wedding.

"Anna."

"Hmm?"

"I want you to do something."

"What?"

"Walk with me when I welcome the groom's family."

He laughed.

"Why me?"

"Because Appa would have wanted it."

Their father had passed away two years earlier.

Prithvi became silent. Their mother had also passed away by then.

For a moment, both remembered the people who had brought them into the world.

"All right," he said.

"I knew you'd agree."

"But I have one condition."

"What?"

"You have to stop giving me instructions."

She laughed.

"Impossible."

The wedding day arrived.

The house was filled with relatives.

Music.

Flowers.

Laughter. Children running everywhere.

Prithvi stood outside waiting. Archana came toward him.

For a moment, he saw the little girl she had once been.

The little girl who had held his finger when she was a baby.

The little girl who had cried when he left for college. The girl who had once said,

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Don't forget me.

He smiled.

"Ready?"

She nodded.

"Yes."

They walked together....Brother and sister.....Side by side.

17

That night, after the wedding, everyone was asleep.

Prithvi sat alone in the old family house. The house had not been sold after all.

Archana had convinced him to keep it.

Now it had become a place where the entire family gathered.

He looked around. The walls were old. The furniture had changed. The children had grown.

But the house still carried their childhood. He heard footsteps.

Archana came in.

"You are still awake?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Thinking."

"About?"

"Everything."

She sat beside him. They remained silent.

Then she said,

"Do you remember the day you left for college?"

"Yes."

"I thought four years was forever."

"It felt like that."

"I was afraid you'd forget me."

He smiled.

"I told you I wouldn't."

"You kept your promise."

He looked at her.

"So did you."

"What did I promise?"

"You said you'd become a doctor."

She smiled.

"I did."

"Yes."

She leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Anna."

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For everything."

He shook his head.

"You don't have to thank your brother."

"I know."

She paused.

"But I want to."

18

A few months later, Archana received a call from a hospital in another country.

She had been selected for a prestigious medical program.

It was a wonderful opportunity. But it meant moving abroad for two years.

She told her brother.

"Should I go?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because..."

She hesitated.

"I don't want to leave everyone."

Prithvi smiled.

"Go."

"What about Amma?"

"She would have told you to go."

"What about the house?"

"I'll take care of it."

"What about you?"

He laughed.

"I'll survive."

She looked at him.

"You always say that."

"Because I always do."

She smiled.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll go."

"Good."

She hugged him.

"You are still the best brother."

He smiled.

"And you are still the most troublesome sister."

19

Before she left, Archana visited the old family house.

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She walked through every room. The room where they had studied.

The kitchen where their mother had cooked. The veranda where their father had sat every evening.

The staircase where Prithvi had once carried her after she hurt her foot.

She stopped at the front door.

Prithvi stood beside her.

"Do you remember?"

"Everything."

She smiled.

"We had so little."

"Yes."

"But we were happy."

"Very."

She looked at him.

"Maybe that was because we had each other."

Prithvi didn't reply. He simply put his arm around her shoulder.

20

Two years later, Archana returned.

She came home unexpectedly. Prithvi was sitting in the veranda.

He heard the gate open. He looked up.Archana stood there. He stared. Then smiled.

"You didn't tell me you were coming."

"I wanted to surprise you."

He got up. They wished each other.

For a few seconds, neither said anything.

Then Prithvi asked,

"Did you bring anything for me?"

She laughed.

"Yes."

"What?"

She opened her suitcase.

"Chocolate."

He smiled.

"What kind?"

"Your favourite."

He took it.

"Finally."

She laughed and said, "You haven't changed."

"Neither have you."

They sat together. She opened the chocolate.

Broke it in half. And gave him the bigger piece. Prithvi looked at it. Then at her.

"You remember?"

She smiled.

"Everything."

21

That evening, they sat on the veranda as the sun went down.

Their children played in the garden. Their spouses talked inside.

The house was full again. Prithvi looked at his sister.

"Archana."

"Hmm?"

"Do you know something?"

"What?"

"I thought being a brother meant protecting you."

She smiled.

"It does."

"No."

He shook his head and said, "I was wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought I was always the one taking care of you."

She looked at him.

"But you took care of me too."

"Not when I was young."

"You did."

"When?"

"When you called me after our father's illness."

"When?"

"When you stayed beside me during Amma's last days."

"When?"

"When you encouraged me to go abroad."

He smiled.

"You remember all that?"

"I remember everything."

She paused.

"You think I was only your little sister."

She smiled.

"But you were also my strength."

Prithvi became quiet. He looked away. Archana continued.

"You helped me become a doctor."

"You helped me become a better person."

He smiled.

"Maybe that's what siblings are."

"What?"

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"Two people who keep saving each other without realizing it."

22

Years later, Prithvi's health began to decline.

Nothing serious at first. A little tiredness. A little weakness.

He ignored it. Archana noticed.

"You need to get checked."

"I'm fine."

"Don't say that."

"I'm fine."

"Anna."

He smiled.

"Doctor mode?"

"Always."

She insisted.

The tests revealed a condition that required treatment.

Archana became worried. Prithvi remained calm.

"You'll be fine," she told him.

He smiled.

"You sound like me."

"Because I learned from you."

Treatment began. There were difficult days. There were hospital visits.

There were long nights. But Archana never left his side.

She adjusted her schedule. She travelled whenever necessary.

She sat beside him during appointments. Sometimes Prithvi would tell her,

"Go home."

"No."

"You have patients."

"They can wait."

"No."

She would smile and said, "You're my patient."

He laughed and said, "You are impossible."

"I learned from the best."

23

One night, Prithvi woke up in the hospital.

Archana was sleeping in the chair beside him.

He looked at her. She had fallen asleep while holding his hand.

He smiled. He remembered the day she was born.The tiny fingers...

The little girl with the old schoolbag. The girl who had cried when he left.

The young woman who had become a doctor. The sister who had forgiven him. The sister who had stood beside him. He gently squeezed her hand. She woke up.

"Anna?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

He looked at her.

"I just wanted to see if you were there."

She smiled.

"Where else would I be?"

24

After his recovery, Prithvi returned home.

He was weaker than before, but happier.vOne evening, he and Archana stood in the garden.

There were two old trees. They had planted them when they were children.

Archana looked at them.

"Do you remember planting these?"

"Yes."

"We thought they'd become huge."

"They did."

She smiled.

"So did we."

Prithvi laughed and said, "We are not huge."

"Our responsibilities are."

"That is true."

They stood silently. Then Archana said,

"Anna."

"Hmm?"

"If we had known when we were children that life would become this complicated, would you still have promised to take care of me?"

He looked at her.

"Of course."

"Even now?"

He smiled.

"Especially now."

She held his hand.

"And I'll take care of you."

"I know."

25

Their story was not extraordinary because they never fought.

They fought. They misunderstood each other.

They lived far apart. They became busy. They sometimes stopped calling. They hurt each other.

But they always came back Because some relationships don't disappear when people move away.

They simply become quieter.

Waiting……Like an old song remembered suddenly.

Like a childhood photograph discovered in a drawer. Like the smell of food from a mother's kitchen.

Like a voice saying your childhood name. One year, the entire family gathered at the old house for a festival.



The grandchildren were running around. Someone was making sweets.

Someone was decorating the entrance. Someone was arguing about music.

The house was alive again. Prithvi stood near the veranda.

Archana came and stood beside him.

"Happy?"

"Very."

She looked around.

"Our parents would have loved this."

"Yes."

"They would have been proud."

Prithvi nodded.

"Of all of us."

Then Archana smiled and said, "Especially of us."

"Why?"

"Because we didn't let life separate us."

Prithvi looked at her.

"Life tried."

She smiled.

"But it failed."

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26

Late that night, everyone had gone to sleep.

Prithvi and Archana sat outside.The moonlight fell across the garden.

There was a gentle breeze.Archana rested her head on his shoulder.

"Anna."

"Hmm?"

"Do you remember what you told me when I was twelve?"

"What?"

"You said your schoolbag didn't decide who I was."

He smiled.

"You remember that?"

"I remember everything."

She looked at him.

"You taught me something that day."

"What?"

"That the things we own don't define us."

She paused and said, "Later in life, you taught me something else."

"What?"

"That the people who stand beside us are worth more than anything we can own."

Prithvi looked at her. She smiled.

"You were my first friend."

He laughed and said, "I was your only friend."

"At that age, yes."

"And now?"

She held his hand.

"Still my first."

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27

Years later, when their children asked them about their childhood, they would tell them stories.

About the old house.

About their parents.....About school.

About the chocolate.....bout the umbrella.

About the bus station....About the hospital.

About the fights. About the forgiveness.But there was one thing they never explained completely.

Why they were always there for each other....Because some things cannot be explained.

A brother may not say, "I love you."

A sister may not say, "You mean everything to me."

Instead, a brother may quietly pay a college fee.

A sister may sit beside him in a hospital. A brother may give his sister the larger piece of chocolate.

A sister may secretly return it years later. A brother may say, "Go chase your dream."

A sister may say, "I'll be beside you."

That is how some families speak.... Not through words.....Through actions.

One evening, many years after their childhood, Archana found an old photograph.

It showed two children standing outside their house.

Prithvi was six.

Archana was still a baby. She was holding his finger. Archana smiled. She took the photograph to Prithvi.

"Look."

He stared at it. For a long moment, he said nothing.

Then he smiled.

"She was so small."

"You were so serious."

"I was responsible."

"You were six."

"I knew my responsibilities."

She laughed.

Then she looked at the photograph again.

"Anna."

"Hmm?"

"Do you remember what you said when I was born?"

"No."

"You said you would take care of me."

He smiled.

"I did."

She looked at him.

"You kept your promise."

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He shook his head.

"No."

"What?"

"You kept yours too."

"What promise?"

"You never stopped being my little sister."

She laughed.

"I never will."

28

That night, Prithvi placed the old photograph on his table.

He looked at it before going to sleep.

Two children....One tiny hand....One protective finger.

A promise made before either of them understood what promises meant.

Life had taken them through childhood, education, careers, marriages, children, responsibilities, misunderstandings, forgiveness, illness and old age.

Yet the photograph remained unchanged. So did the promise.

Because perhaps that is what a brother and sister truly are.

They are two separate lives carrying a small piece of the same childhood.

They may live in different cities. They may have different dreams.

They may build different families. They may even spend months without speaking.

But somewhere inside each of them remains the child who once ran through the same house...

ate from the same kitchen... waited for the same parents...

celebrated the same festivals... and dreamed beneath the same roof.

A brother may grow old. A sister may grow old.

But somewhere inside their hearts, one will always remain the person who once held the other's hand and said:

"Don't worry. I'm here."

And the beautiful truth is this:

Sometimes we spend our whole lives searching for someone who will stand beside us no matter what.

A brother and sister may discover that person much earlier.

They simply have to remember what they have always known.

That no matter how far life takes them...

No matter how many years pass... No matter how many disagreements come...

No matter how much the world changes... **some bonds are not meant to be broken.**

They are meant to be carried.

From childhood... into adulthood... through every storm... until the very end.

Because a brother is not merely someone who shares your parents.

A sister is not merely someone who grew up in the same house.

They are witnesses to each other's beginning.

They remember the child you were before the world knew you. They know your first tears.

Your first dreams. Your first fears. Your first victories.

And when everyone else sees the person you have become...

your brother or sister can still see the little child you once were.

Perhaps that is why the bond feels so different.

It is not simply love. It is memory. It is protection. It is friendship.

It is forgiveness. It is home. And sometimes, it is the quietest promise of all:

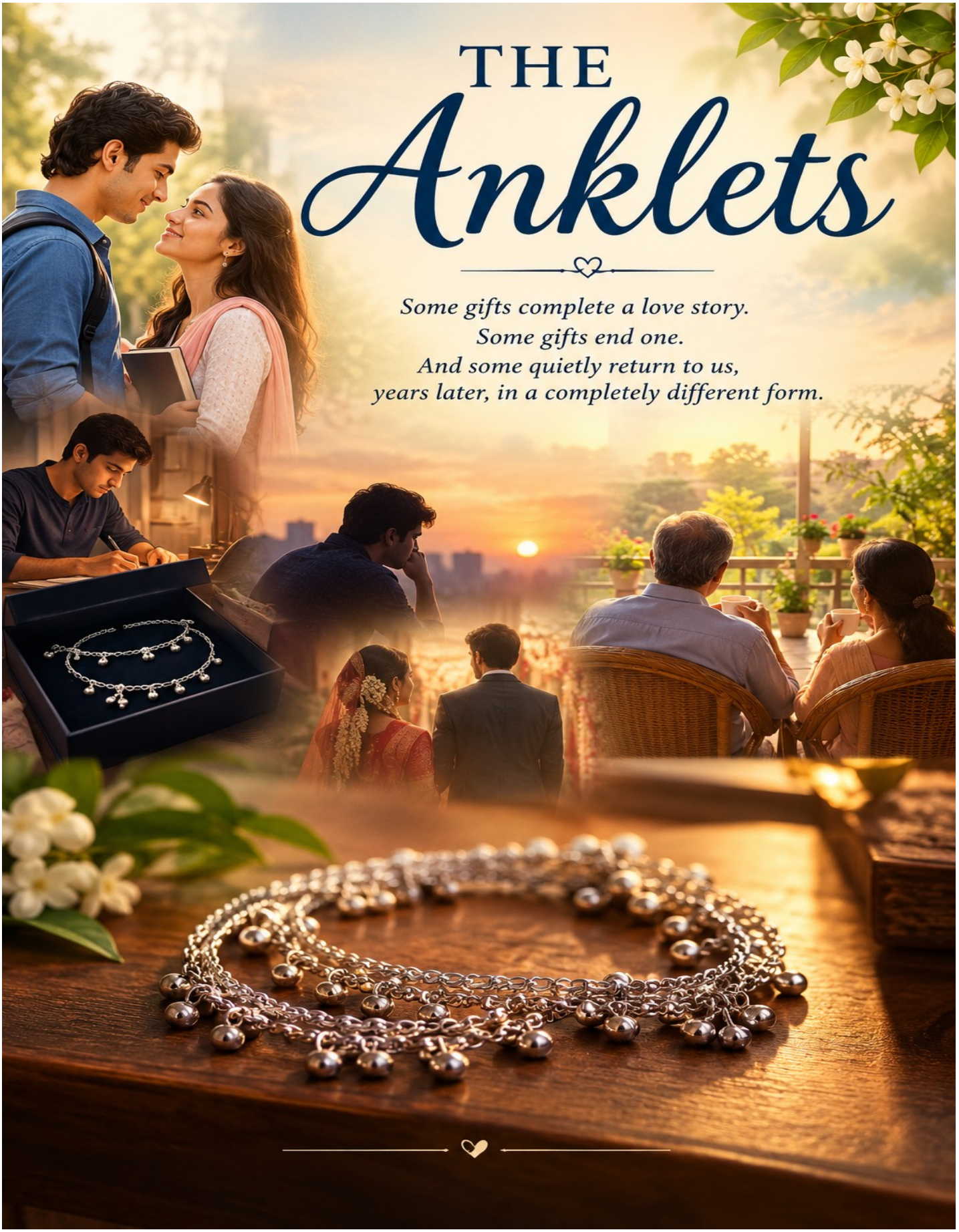
"Whatever happens to you in this life, you will never have to face it completely alone."

Prithvi and Archana never needed to say that promise again.

They had already lived it. And that was enough.....

****

Comments can be sent to : touchingwaves@gmail.com


THE
Anklets
Some gifts complete a love story.
Some gifts end one.
And some quietly return to us,
years later, in a completely different form.

Some gifts complete a love story.
Some gifts end one.
And some quietly return to us, years later, in a completely different form.

Prem first noticed Yashaswini because of her smile.

Not because she was the most beautiful girl in the college.

Not because she dressed differently from everyone else.

Not because she tried to attract attention.

It was simply because she had a smile that made ordinary moments feel a little brighter.

She sat two rows ahead of him.

Every morning, she would enter the classroom with her books pressed against her chest, greet her friends, and take her seat near the window.

Prem never had the courage to speak to her.

For almost three months, he only watched her from a distance.

Then one afternoon, fate gave him an opportunity.

The professor asked Prem to distribute some assignment papers.

He walked down the rows.

When he reached Yashaswini's desk, she looked up.

"Thank you, Prem."

He froze.

She knew his name. He smiled awkwardly.

"You're welcome."

He walked back to his seat. His friend Ravi immediately leaned toward him.

"Why are you smiling?"

"I'm not."

"You are."

Prem tried to concentrate on the lesson.

But he couldn't. That one sentence—

"Thank you, Prem."

—had occupied his entire mind.

1. A Quiet Beginning

Their friendship grew slowly. There were no dramatic declarations.

No long phone calls in the beginning. No promises.

Just small conversations.

"Did you complete the assignment?"

"Are you coming tomorrow?"

"Did you understand what the professor explained?"

"Can you send me those notes?"

The ordinary questions slowly became important.

Prem discovered that Yashaswini liked old songs.

She discovered that Prem loved cricket.

He liked tea.

She preferred coffee. He enjoyed travelling. She preferred staying home with her family.

They were different in many ways. But they understood each other.

One evening, after college, they stood near the gate waiting for the rain to stop.

Yashaswini looked at him.

"Prem."

"Hmm?"

"Do you believe people can understand each other without saying everything?"

Prem smiled.

"Sometimes."

"I think we do."

He looked at her. She looked away. Neither said anything more. But both understood.

Their friendship had quietly become love.

2. Her Birthday

Yashaswini's birthday was approaching.

Prem wanted to give her something special. Not something expensive.

Something meaningful.

He visited several shops. He looked at watches.

Books. Handbags. Perfumes.

Small ornaments. Nothing felt right.

One evening, while walking through a jewellery shop, he saw a pair of silver anklets.

They were simple and Elegant. They had tiny bells that made a soft sound whenever they moved.

Prem stood there for a long time. He imagined Yashaswini wearing them.

He smiled.

"How much?"

The shopkeeper told him the price. Prem's smile disappeared. It was more money than he had.

Much more. He didn't give up. That night, he made a decision. He would earn it.

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3. Two Months

Prem found a part-time opportunity as a home tutor.

Every evening after college, he travelled to a nearby house and taught two schoolchildren.

He taught mathematics. Sometimes science. Sometimes English.

The work was tiring. He returned home late.

His mother would ask:

"Why are you coming so late every day?"

"College work."

He didn't tell her about the anklets. He wanted it to be a surprise. For two months, Prem saved almost every rupee he earned.

He avoided eating outside. He stopped going to movies with friends.

He walked home instead of taking an auto whenever possible. His friends noticed.

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing."

"You're suddenly becoming very economical."

Prem laughed.

"I have a reason."

He did. At the end of the second month, he counted his savings.

It was enough. The next day, he went to the jewellery shop and asked, "I want those anklets."

The shopkeeper recognized him.

"You saved for them?"

Prem smiled and said, "Yes."

The shopkeeper packed them carefully. Prem held the small box in his hands. He looked them optimistically that she will be his wife one day...



It felt heavier than its actual weight. Inside it was not merely silver.

It contained two months of his effort. His affection. His hope.

And a future he had begun imagining.

4. The Birthday

On her birthday, Prem met Yashaswini in the evening.

He handed her a small wrapped box.

"What is this?"

"Your birthday gift."

She opened it. Her eyes widened. The silver anklets lay inside. She touched them gently.

"You bought these?"

"Yes."

"They're beautiful."

"I'm glad you like them."

She looked at him and asked, "How much did they cost?"

"Why?"

"Tell me."

Prem smiled and said, "Don't worry about it."

She understood immediately.

"You worked for these, didn't you?"

He remained silent.

"Prem..."

"It's nothing."

"No."

She looked at the anklets again and said, "You worked hard for this."

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He smiled.

"I wanted to give you something you would remember."

Yashaswini's eyes became moist. She held the box close.

"I will."

5. The Dream

Their love became stronger. They began discussing marriage. Not as a distant dream. As a possibility.

They spoke about their families. Their careers. Their future. Prem believed that love would eventually convince everyone.

Yashaswini believed it too.



But life sometimes asks questions for which love alone does not have an answer.

Their families objected. There were differences.

There were circumstances neither Prem nor Yashaswini had created.

They tried. They talked. They waited. They asked relatives to intervene.

They hoped. They cried. They tried again.

But every door seemed to close.

One evening, Yashaswini met Prem.

She was unusually quiet. Prem understood before she spoke.

"What happened?"

She looked down and said, "Prem..."

He waited.

"I tried."

"I know."

"I really tried."

"I know."

She began crying.

"I don't know what else I can do."

Prem stared at the ground.

For a long time, neither spoke. The anklets were still with her. She had never removed them.

6. The Wedding That Didn't Happen

The wedding they had imagined never happened.

Yashaswini eventually married another man.

The reasons were complicated. Family circumstances, Responsibilities.

Decisions made under pressure. Things beyond what either of them could change.

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Prem did not blame her. At least, he tried not to.

But understanding something and accepting it are two different things.

After her marriage, Prem withdrew from everyone.

He stopped answering calls. He lost interest in cricket.

He stopped meeting friends. He didn't care about clothes.

He didn't care about celebrations.

His work became mechanical. He ate because he had to.

Slept because he was tired. Woke up because morning came.

His mother watched him silently.

One night she sat beside him.

"Prem."

He didn't answer.

"How long will you punish yourself?"

He looked at her.

"I am not punishing myself."

"Then what are you doing?"

He had no answer.

She placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Life did not end because one part of it ended."

Prem looked away. At that time, he wasn't ready to understand her words.

7. Two Years

Two years passed. Nothing dramatic happened.

And perhaps that was what changed him.

One ordinary morning, Prem looked at himself in the mirror.

He suddenly realized something. He had spent two years waiting for a life that was never going to return.

He remembered his mother's words.

Life did not end because one part of it ended.

For the first time, he accepted the truth.

Yashaswini had moved on.

He needed to move too. He began concentrating on his career.

He studied. He improved his skills. He attended interviews. He accepted rejection.

He tried again. Slowly, things changed. He got a good job. Then a better position.

His confidence returned.He began meeting friends again. He started travelling.

He laughed. Not because he had forgotten the past.

But because the past no longer controlled his present.

8. Ten Years Later

Ten years passed.

One afternoon, Ravi created a group message.

"Friends Reunion — Ten Years!"

Everyone responded immediately. Plans were made. A restaurant was booked.

Old photographs were collected. Everyone promised to attend.

Then someone mentioned Yashaswini.

There was a pause in the group. Finally, Ravi wrote:

"She is also coming."

Prem read the message. He stared at it for several seconds.

Then he put his phone down. He didn't feel the old pain.

Not exactly. There was only a strange silence inside him.

Ten years had passed. He was no longer the same person. Neither was she.

9. The Reunion

The evening was filled with laughter. Friends remembered college days.

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They argued about who had been the naughtiest. They looked at old photographs.

Someone found a picture of Prem sleeping in class. Everyone laughed.

"Look at Prem!"

"Delete that!"

"No!"

Prem laughed with them. Then he saw her.

Yashaswini.

She had entered quietly. For a moment, their eyes met. Neither smiled immediately.



Some time silence travelled between them.

Nobody dared to wish one another....

Few more minutes passed.

Then she gave a small smile but there was no life in it.

Prem returned it. That was all. They eventually spoke.

"How are you?"

"I'm good."

"How is your family?"

"Good."

"Your work?"

"Going well."

"That's nice."

"How about you?"

"Good."

The conversation ended.

Ten years of history had somehow become six or seven ordinary sentences.

But underneath those sentences lived everything they had once been.

10. The Silence

As the evening progressed, everyone became comfortable.

But whenever Prem and Yashaswini happened to stand near each other, there was silence.

Not anger. Not resentment.

Just history. Some memories don't disappear.

They simply become quieter. At the end of the evening, everyone began leaving.

Prem stood outside waiting for his car. Yashaswini walked toward him.

"Prem."

He turned.

She hesitated.

"I wanted to say something."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

Prem remained silent.

"I know you understand that things were not in my hands."

He nodded.

"But I still wanted to say it."

She looked at him and said, "I am sorry that I couldn't marry you."

Prem gave a small smile.

"Don't be."

"I know life moved on for both of us."

She paused for some time and said, "I'm genuinely happy seeing you today."

Prem looked at her.

"You've done well."

She smiled.

"And you?"

"I'm fine."

She nodded.

"I'm happy for you, Prem."

There was another silence. Then she said:

"Take care."

"You too."

She walked away.

Prem watched her for a few seconds.Then he smiled.

Not the smile of the young man who had once bought silver anklets.

A different smile. The smile of a man who had finally made peace with his past.

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11. The New House

A few months later, Prem bought a house.

It was not a mansion.It was simply the home he had dreamed about.

A comfortable living room. A small garden. A quiet study. A beautiful kitchen.

He organized a housewarming ceremony. He invited his family. His relatives And all his old college friends. Including Yashaswini.

She came. Everyone was happy. There was laughter everywhere.

Photographs, Food and Memories.

Friends teased Prem about his college days.

At the end of the ceremony, Yashaswini approached him.

"I brought something for your house."

She handed him and his wife a beautifully wrapped package.

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Inside there was a silver multipurpose bowl.

He smiled and said, "Thank you."

"Keep it."

"I will."

She smiled and said, "Congratulations, Prem."

"Thank you."

The gathering continued. Nobody knew the story behind that bowl.

Nobody except Yashaswini.

In the evening, after the function, Prem and Preethi opened all gifts.

They opened gift given by yashaswini.

It was the multi purpose silver bowl.

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12. The Phone Call

That night, after everyone left, Prem received a call.

It was Yashaswini.

"Prem?"

"Yes?"

"Did you like the gift?"

"Yes. It's beautiful."

There was a pause.

"There's something I should tell you."

Prem became attentive.

"The silver in that bowl..."

She stopped.

"It came from the anklets."

Prem didn't speak.

"The anklets you gave me."

His hand tightened around the phone. Yashaswini continued.

"I kept them for many years."

"Then?"

"I couldn't wear them forever."

She took a breath.

"I always felt guilty about that."

"Why?"

"Because you worked for two months to buy them."

Prem looked at the silver bowl on the table.

"I wanted to return something to you that represented the effort you had put into them."

She paused.

"If I had married you, I would probably have worn those anklets for the rest of my life."

Prem closed his eyes.

"But life chose a different path."

Neither spoke for several seconds.

"I thought the silver should come back to you somehow," she said.

"So I had them melted down and made into that bowl."

Prem remained silent.

"Prem?"

"Yes."

"Are you upset?"

"No."

"Really?"

He looked at the bowl.

"No."

Then, after a pause, he quietly said:

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"Okay."

The call ended.

Prem sat alone in his new house. The silver bowl was in front of him.

Once, that silver had been a symbol of his future. Now it was sitting quietly on his dining table.

Life had a strange sense of humor.

13. Twenty Years

Years passed.

Prem built a peaceful life.He married **Preeti**. They had a happy family. There were responsibilities.

Arguments. Laughter. Bills. Vacations. Festivals. Ordinary days.

In other words— life.

Prem rarely thought about Yashaswini anymore. The memory existed somewhere in the past.

Not painful. Not demanding.

Just part of the story that had made him who he was.

Then came their twentieth wedding anniversary. Preeti wanted to buy herself a pair of silver anklets.

"I've wanted them for a long time," she told Prem.

"Then buy them."

"I want to exchange my old anklets."

"Fine."

"I also have some old silver items."

"Take them."

She looked at the silver bowl.

"What about this?"

Prem looked at it.

The old bowl had become slightly scratched.

"We don't use it much."

"Can I give this also for exchange?"

Prem thought a little bit. He thought twice and said, "Yes."

Preeti smiled.

"Thank you."

She collected the old silver items. The anklets.

Some small silver articles. And the old multipurpose bowl.

She took them to the jewellery shop.

14. The New Anklets

A few days later, Preeti returned home.

She opened a small box. It was the new pair of Silver Anklets.

She watched them and little smile and happiness came on her face.



In the evening, Prem came home.

She told to prem, "Look."

Prem saw the box. Inside was a beautiful new pair of silver anklets.

"They're lovely."

"I exchanged the old ones."

"Good."

She sat down and wore them. Then she stood up. The tiny bells made a soft sound.

Chin... chin...

Prem looked up. Something happened inside him.

He couldn't explain it. He had heard that sound before.

Long ago. Very long ago. A young Prem.

A birthday....A small jewellery box..... A pair of silver anklets.

A girl named Yashaswini.

The memories appeared for only a few seconds. Then disappeared.

Preeti smiled.

"How do they look?"

"Beautiful."

She walked across the room. The anklets made that gentle sound again.

Chin... chin...

Prem smiled.

He didn't know why the sound touched him so deeply. He simply watched his wife walk across their home.

The home they had built together. The life they had built together.

15. The Circle

That night, Prem sat alone for a while. He thought about how strange life was.

When he was young, he had worked for two months to buy anklets for the woman he wanted to marry.

He never imagined that those anklets would one day be melted down.

He never imagined the silver would become a bowl. He never imagined that bowl would remain in his house for years.

He never imagined that his wife would eventually exchange that bowl.

And he certainly never imagined that the silver would return to his life as anklets again.

Different anklets. Different woman. Different home.

Different life. But the same silver.

Prem smiled. Perhaps life had quietly completed a circle he had never known existed.

16. The Meaning of the Anklets

He looked at Preeti.

She was happily arranging some things in the cupboard.

The anklets made a soft sound as she moved.

Prem smiled.

Once, those anklets had represented a love he thought would last forever.

When that love ended, he believed something precious had been lost forever.

But perhaps he had misunderstood life.

Nothing had been lost.

Something had simply changed its form.

The silver had changed. The relationship had changed.

The person had changed. The house had changed. Even Prem himself had changed.

But the value of the effort he had once made remained.

The two months of work had not been wasted. The love had not been meaningless.

The heartbreak had not been meaningless. All of it had shaped the man who eventually built a life with Preeti.

17. A Few Years Later

One evening, Preeti was sitting in the garden.

The anklets made their familiar sound as she walked toward him.

Prem looked up.

She smiled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

Prem smiled.

"How lucky I am."

Preeti laughed.

"After twenty years, you finally realized?"

"Maybe."

She sat beside him.

The evening breeze moved through the trees.

The anklets made a faint sound.

Prem listened.

This time there was no sadness. No regret. No question. Only peace.

18. What Prem Finally Understood

As he grew older, Prem understood something he had not understood as a young man.

Love is not always about getting the person we want. Sometimes love teaches us how to let go.

Sometimes life takes away the future we imagined and gives us another future we never imagined.

At twenty-five, Prem had thought his story had ended.

At twenty-seven, he learned to begin again.

At thirty-seven, he had a successful career.

At forty, he had a family.

At forty-five, he understood that happiness was not something that belonged only to the past.

It could be built again. And sometimes—

The things we think we have lost forever quietly return to us in another form.

19. The Sound

Years later, Preeti was still wearing the silver anklets.

One evening, she walked across the living room.

Chin... chin...

Prem looked up from his book.

He smiled.

He didn't know the complete journey of the silver anymore.

Perhaps he didn't need to.

The anklets had travelled through a young man's dream.

Through two months of hard work.

Through a love story that could not become a marriage.

Through heartbreak. Through ten years of silence. Through a reunion.

Through an apology. Through a silver bowl.

Through another decade. And finally—

into the home of the woman Prem had actually married.

The journey had taken years. But perhaps that was the point.

Life does not always take us where we planned to go.

Sometimes it takes us somewhere better suited to who we eventually become.

20. Life Is Full of Surprises

Prem sometimes wondered what would have happened if he had never bought those anklets.

What if he had chosen another gift?

What if he had not worked those two months?

What if Yashaswini had never returned them?

What if she had kept them?

What if the silver bowl had never been exchanged?

What if Preeti had never asked for permission?

What if the old silver had been thrown away?

There were hundreds of questions. But life does not answer *what ifs*.

It simply moves forward.

The anklets had once represented the woman Prem wanted to marry.

Years later, the same silver became part of the life he actually lived.

And perhaps that was life's quiet way of telling him:

Some things are not meant to remain where we first place them.

Some dreams change their shape. Some endings become beginnings.

And sometimes, what we think belongs to our past finds its way into our future—not to reopen an old story, but to remind us how far we have travelled.

Prem looked at Preeti.

She smiled at him. The anklets sounded again.

Chin... chin...

This time, the sound carried no memory of heartbreak. It carried the sound of home.

Prem smiled. He finally understood. The anklets had never really been about Yashaswini.

They had been about love. About effort.

About loss.

About acceptance.

About moving forward.

And above all— About the strange, beautiful way life completes its own circles.

Because sometimes we choose our path. Sometimes circumstances choose it for us.

And sometimes life quietly takes something from our hands... only to return it years later in a form we never expected.

Life is full of surprises.

You never know what happens when.

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And perhaps that is what makes life worth living.

21. The Veranda

Years passed. Prem eventually retired from his job.

On the first morning after retirement, he woke up at the same time he had for decades.

Six o'clock.

He got out of bed. Then stopped. There was nowhere he had to go.

No office. No meeting. No hurried breakfast.

No traffic. No deadlines.

He stood near the window and smiled.

Preeti was already in the kitchen.

"Why are you standing there?"

"I don't know."

"Now you have plenty of time to find out."

Prem laughed.

Retirement changed their routine. Their mornings became slower.

Their evenings became longer.

They started sitting together on the veranda every evening with two cups of coffee.

The garden had grown beautifully over the years.

A few flowering plants stood near the steps. Birds visited the compound wall.

The evening breeze moved gently through the trees.

And sometimes, when Preeti walked across the veranda, her silver anklets made that familiar sound.

Chin... chin...

Prem would look up.

Even after all those years, the sound still brought a strange smile to his face.

One evening, they sat together as usual.

Preeti took a sip of coffee. Prem looked at the garden.

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"Retirement isn't bad."

Preeti smiled.

"You said you would be bored."

"I was wrong."

"You are finally admitting that?"

"Don't get used to it."

She laughed. For a few moments, they sat quietly.

Then Preeti looked at him.

"Prem."

"Hmm?"

"Do you remember the silver bowl?"

Prem turned toward her.

"Of course."

"The one I exchanged for these anklets?"

"Yes."

Preeti smiled.

"Do you know something?"

"What?"

"I knew."

"Knew what?"

"The whole story."

Prem stared at her.

"What story?"

"The story of the anklets."

He put down his coffee cup. Preeti continued calmly.

"I knew that those anklets had once belonged to Yashaswini."

Prem became silent.

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"How?"

"I found out years ago."

"When?"

She smiled.

"Before I exchanged the bowl."

Prem looked at her with surprise.

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"And you still exchanged it?"

"Of course."

Prem shook his head.

"Why?"

Preeti looked at the anklets on her feet. Then she smiled.

"Because I thought perhaps fortune had finally decided to send the silver back to you."

Prem couldn't speak for a moment. She continued.

"Think about it."

She raised her eyebrows playfully.

"You worked for two months to buy those anklets."

Prem smiled.

"They went to someone else."

"Yes."

"Then they became a bowl."

"Yes."

"Then I gave you permission to exchange the bowl."

"Correct."

"And you deliberately bought anklets."

"Exactly."

Prem laughed.

"You planned all this?"

"Of course."

"You are dangerous."

"I have been married to you for twenty years. You should have known that by now."

Both laughed.

22. Preeti's Little Tease

Preeti lifted one foot slightly. The anklets made a soft sound.

Chin... chin...

She looked at Prem.

"How do they sound?"

"Good."

"Only good?"

"Very good."

"Why?"

"I like the sound."

She smiled mischievously.

"Or does the sound remind you of someone?"

Prem immediately looked at her.

"Preeti!"

She burst out laughing.

"Why are you getting nervous?"

"I'm not nervous."

"Then why did you suddenly become serious?"

Prem shook his head and said, "You enjoy troubling me."

"Of course."

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She took another sip of coffee.

Then deliberately moved her feet.

Chin... chin... chin...

"Listen carefully."

Prem laughed.

"Stop it."

"Why?"

"Because you know exactly what you're doing."

"I am just wearing my anklets."

"You are teasing me."

"Maybe."

She smiled. Then she became a little more serious.

"Prem, don't misunderstand me."

He looked at her and said, "I never bought these anklets because I was competing with someone from your past."

"I know."

"I bought them because I wanted to remind you of something."

"What?"

"That life gave you another chance."

Prem looked at her quietly.

"You once bought those anklets for the woman you thought you would spend your life with."

She paused.

"But they didn't remain with her."

"They came back in another form."

"And now?"

"They are with the woman you actually spent your life with."

Prem smiled and Preeti continued: "Maybe that is what life wanted."

23. The Fortune That Came Back

The evening light was slowly fading. Prem looked at the anklets.

For years, he had thought of them as a strange coincidence.

Now he understood that Preeti had deliberately completed the circle.

"You really think it was fortune?"

Preeti smiled and said, "I don't know whether it was fortune."

"Then?"

"Maybe it was simply life."

She looked at him.

"Sometimes life takes something away from us."

"Sometimes it gives something else."

"And sometimes..."

She touched one of the anklets.

"...it returns the same thing to us after changing its meaning."

Prem smiled.

"That's a very philosophical statement."

"I learned from you."

"I never say things like that."

"You do when you are retired."

He laughed.

24. The Same Anklets, A Different Life

Preeti stood up to take the coffee cups inside.

As she walked away, the anklets sounded again.

Chin... chin...

Prem watched her.

Years ago, that sound would have carried him back to a young girl.

A birthday, A small jewellery box.

Two months of hard work. A love that never became a marriage.

But now?

The same sound carried him somewhere completely different.

To a house they had built together.

To twenty years of marriage. To children, To family celebrations.

To difficult days they had survived together.

To mornings and evenings, To countless cups of coffee.

To retirement….To the veranda…..To Preeti.

He smiled. The sound had changed.

Not because the anklets had changed. But because **he had.**

25. One Last Tease



Preeti returned with the empty cups.

She sat beside him.

"Prem."

"Yes?"

"I have one more question."

"What?"

"If Yashaswini had not returned those anklets..."

Prem smiled and asked, "What?"

"Would you still have married me?"

Prem looked at her and said, "Of course."

"Sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Think carefully."

"I don't need to."

She smiled and said, "Good answer."

Then she moved her feet again.

Chin... chin...

Prem laughed.

"You are never going to stop teasing me about these anklets, are you?"

"Never."

"Even after retirement?"

"Especially after retirement."

"Why?"

"Because now I have the whole day."

They both laughed....The sun had almost disappeared. The garden became quieter.

Preeti leaned back in her chair. Prem took another sip of coffee.

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The anklets made one final gentle sound.

Chin... chin...

Prem looked at his wife. He smiled. And somewhere deep inside, he felt grateful.

Not for the love he had lost. But for the life he had found.

The anklets had travelled a long way.

From a young man's dream... to a young woman's feet... from a broken love story...

to a silver bowl...from an unexpected gift... to another pair of feet...and finally—

to the veranda of two people who had grown old together.

Perhaps that was the real surprise.

Prem had once believed the anklets belonged to his past , But life had other plans.

It had carried them through years and returned them to his present.

Not as a reminder of what he had lost. But as a celebration of what he had gained.

Preeti looked at him and smiled and asked, "Coffee?"

Prem smiled back.

"Yes."

She stood up.

Chin... chin...

And this time, Prem didn't think about the past at all.

He simply listened.

Because sometimes the most beautiful sound in life is not the sound of something returning.

It is the sound of realizing that **you are exactly where you are meant to be.**

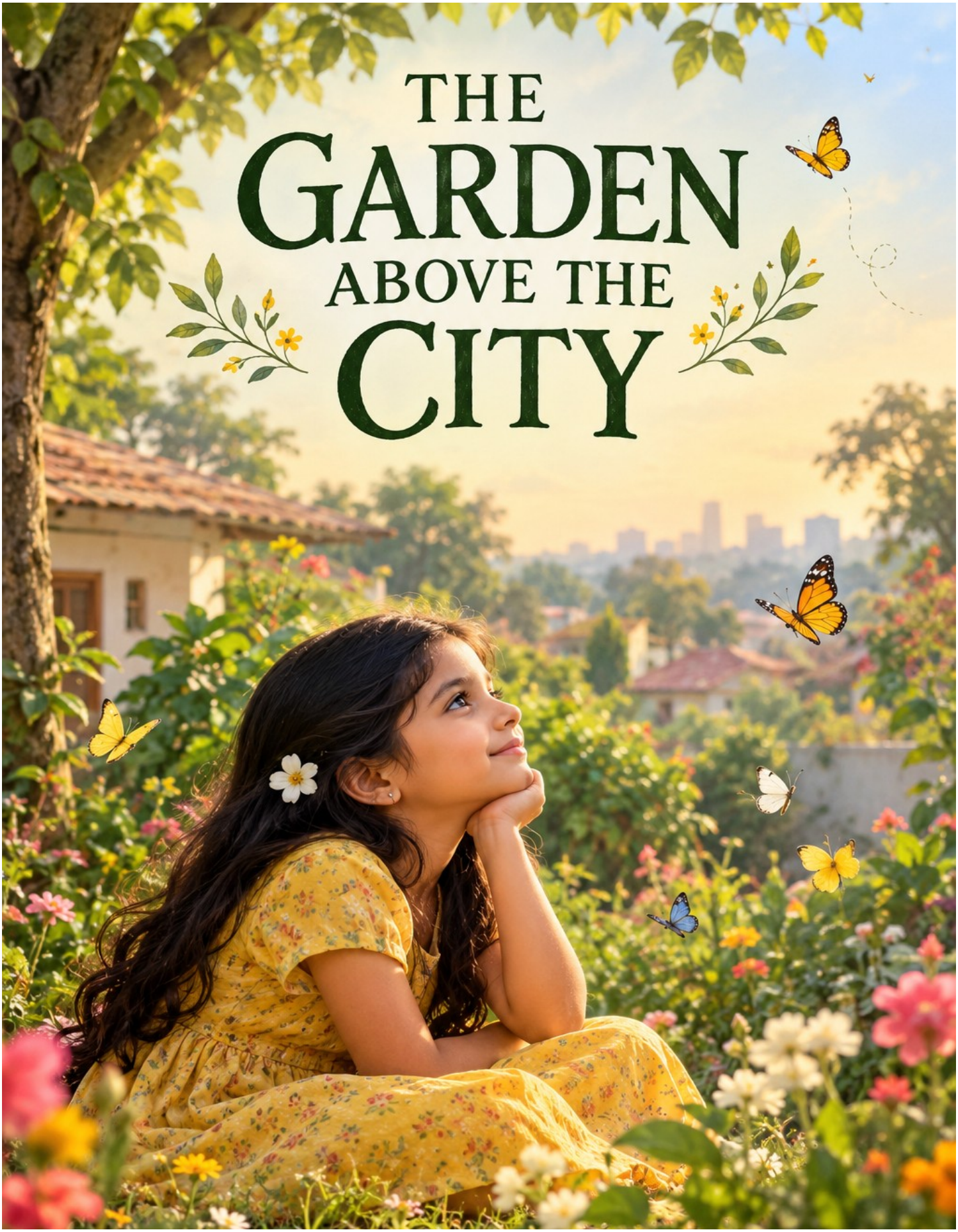
The anklets had completed their journey.

And so had Prem.

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THE
GARDEN
ABOVE THE
CITY

Kavya was born in a small village that seemed to have been forgotten by the hurried world outside.

The village did not have tall buildings.

It did not have crowded roads.

It did not have shopping malls, traffic signals, or long lines of vehicles honking impatiently at one another.

There were a few small shops along the main road, a government school, a temple beneath an old banyan tree, a tea stall where the elderly men gathered every evening, and houses scattered across the village with open spaces between them.

But for Kavya, the village was not merely a place where she had been born.

It was her entire world.

And within that world, there was one place she loved more than anywhere else.

Her garden.

Her house was an independent house with two rooms in the front and a small garden behind them.

It was not a large garden.

There were no expensive flower pots, no carefully designed pathways, and no gardener coming every morning to maintain it.

It was simply a patch of green earth that had grown along with Kavya.

There were flowering plants, a few small shrubs, a couple of fruit trees, some plants her mother had brought from neighboring houses, and several others that had appeared almost by themselves.

To someone else, it might have looked ordinary.

To Kavya, it was magical.

Because of the butterflies. They came every morning.

Yellow butterflies. White butterflies. Blue ones. Orange ones.

Tiny butterflies that disappeared almost as soon as they landed.

Large ones that moved slowly from flower to flower as if they had nowhere else to go.

Kavya never knew their names.

She did not need to. She simply loved watching them.

As a little girl, she would sit quietly on the grass and watch them flutter around her.

Sometimes one would land on a flower only a few feet away.

Kavya would stop breathing for a moment. She would move her hand slowly toward it.

And just when she thought she could touch it—

The butterfly would fly away. She would laugh.

"Go... go..."

Then she would wait for it to return. Her mother often watched her from the doorway.

"Kavya!"

Kavya would turn.

"Come and eat."

"Coming, Amma!"

But she would not come immediately.

She would first watch the butterfly until it disappeared behind the flowers.

Only then would she run inside. Her mother would shake her head.

"One day these butterflies will take you away from us."

Kavya would laugh.

"No, Amma. I will never leave them."

Her mother would smile.

"Let us see."

Neither of them knew then how much truth those simple words would carry.

THE LITTLE GIRL AND HER GARDEN

Kavya's childhood followed the rhythm of the village.

School in the morning. Lunch at home.

A little rest. And then the garden.

Every evening, after returning from school, Kavya would change her clothes, wash her face, eat something, and take her books outside.

She had a small mat.

She would spread it over the grass beneath the shade of a tree.

Her school bag would be beside her. Her notebook would be open.

Her pencil would be in her hand. And the butterflies would be her silent companions.



Her mother would often bring her an evening snack.

Sometimes it was hot bajji. Sometimes it was murukku.

Sometimes roasted groundnuts. Sometimes a plate of sliced fruit.

On some days, it was simply a glass of milk.

"Here," her mother would say, placing the plate beside her.

Kavya would look up.

"Thank you, Amma."

"Finish your homework before it gets dark."

"I will."

Her mother would return inside. Kavya would bend over her notebook.

For ten minutes she would write.Then she would look at a butterfly.

Write again. Look at another.

Write. Look. Smile.

Her homework somehow always got completed.

Perhaps not as quickly as it would have inside the house.

But it got done. The garden was never a distraction to her.

It was her comfort.

When she was happy, she went to the garden. When she was sad, she went to the garden.

When she was angry with her friends, she went to the garden. When she received good marks, she ran to the garden.

When she failed to answer a question in class, she sat in the garden and forgot about it.

The garden never asked her why she was happy. It never asked why she was sad.

It simply remained there.

Quietly. Faithfully. Waiting for her.

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THE YEARS THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING EXCEPT ONE THING

Children grow without realizing that they are growing.

One day Kavya was sitting on the grass with a school notebook.

Another day, she was sitting there with a college textbook.

The little girl slowly became a young woman. Her school uniform disappeared.

College clothes replaced it. Her hair became longer.

Her books became heavier. Her handwriting became more confident.

Her conversations became more mature. But one thing remained unchanged.

The garden....And the butterflies.

Even her evening drink changed.

When she was a little girl, her mother would bring her milk in a glass.

As she grew older, milk became coffee.

"Your coffee," her mother would say.

Kavya would smile.

"Leave it here, Amma."

Her mother would place the cup beside her.Mat became chair sometimes.

The grass was still there and having coffe in the garden has become her favourite thing.



The flowers were still there. And the butterflies still came.

Sometimes Kavya wondered whether the butterflies recognized her.

Perhaps they did. Perhaps they didn't.

But whenever she sat down, they seemed to appear.

She had never thought of the garden as something she owned.

She felt as though she belonged to it.

THE COLLEGE YEARS

After completing school, Kavya joined a college.

The college was in a nearby town. Many students from the village stayed in hostels.

Some encouraged Kavya to join them.

"It will be fun."

"We can stay together."

"You will enjoy hostel life."

Kavya listened. But she quietly refused. Her parents were initially surprised.

"Why don't you stay in the hostel? It will be easier."

"I want to come home every day."

"Every day?"

"Yes."

Her father laughed.

"Is college that close?"

"It doesn't matter."

"What doesn't matter?"

"I want to come home."

Her father looked at her. He understood.

He knew where she wanted to go after college.

The garden. So every day, Kavya traveled to college and returned home.

And every evening, she returned to the same patch of grass.

The same mat.

The same plants.

The same flowers.

And the same butterflies.



Her life seemed to move forward while one part of it remained exactly where it had always been.

She grew older.

But the garden stayed familiar.

She learned new subjects. But the butterflies continued teaching her the same lesson.

That life could be beautiful without being complicated.

THE FIRST FEAR

Kavya completed her graduation. Her parents were proud. Her relatives were happy.

And then, as happens in many families, the next conversation began.

Marriage.

At first, Kavya tried not to think about it. Her mother began looking at photographs.

Her father started speaking to relatives. People began visiting.

Names were mentioned. Families were discussed. Jobs were compared. Horoscopes were checked.

Kavya listened quietly.

One evening, she sat in the garden. Her mother joined her.

"What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

"You are thinking something."

Kavya smiled faintly.

"Amma..."

"Hmm?"

"What happens after marriage?"

Her mother looked at her.

"What do you mean?"

"If I get married..."

She paused.

"What if I have to go to a city?"

Her mother understood.

"The city is not a bad place."

"I know."

"Then?"

Kavya looked around.

"What happens to this?"

Her mother followed her gaze.

The flowers. The trees. The grass. The butterflies.

"You can have plants wherever you go."

"A garden like this?"

"Why not?"

Kavya remained silent.

"In a city, Amma, houses are small."

"Not all houses."

"People live in flats."

"Many flats have balconies."

"Balcony is not a garden."

Her mother smiled.

"Then find a man who will give you a garden."

Kavya laughed.

"Is that how marriage works?"

"Perhaps."

Her mother placed her hand on Kavya's shoulder.

"You are worrying about something that hasn't happened yet."

But Kavya's fear did not disappear.

It quietly grew. She did not fear marriage.

She did not even fear leaving her parents. What frightened her was leaving the garden.

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She had never lived without it. How could she suddenly live without it?

KARTHIK

One day, Kavya's father came home with a photograph.

"There is a family I know."

Kavya looked at him.

"The boy's name is Karthik."

"What does he do?"

"He has a good job in the city."

Kavya looked at the photograph. Karthik appeared calm and pleasant.

He had a good job. He came from a respectable family.

He was well settled. The families spoke. Everything seemed suitable.

But Kavya's mind had already gone somewhere else.

The city. The flat.... No garden. No butterflies.

Her father noticed her silence.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"You don't like him?"

"I haven't met him."

"Then meet him."

Kavya nodded.

THE MEETING

Karthik came to Kavya's house with his parents.

The formal introductions happened inside. Tea was served.

Snacks were passed around. The usual questions were asked.

Education. Job. Family. Interests and Plans.

After some time, the parents decided to give Kavya and Karthik a little privacy.

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"Go outside and talk."

Kavya's father smiled.

"You can sit in the garden."

Kavya looked at him. Karthik followed her.

They walked toward the back. The moment Karthik entered the garden, he slowed down.

He looked around. The air was different. The flowers gave the place a natural fragrance.

There was a slight breeze. A butterfly moved from one flower to another.

Another followed. Karthik smiled.

"This is beautiful."

Kavya looked at him.

"This is my favorite place."

"I can see that."

"How?"

"You look different here."

She smiled.

"Different?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"You look... peaceful."

Kavya looked at the flowers.

"I spend most of my time here."

"Since childhood?"

"Yes."

Karthik nodded.

They sat on a small bench.

For a few moments, neither spoke.

Then Karthik asked,

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"What do you like doing?"

Kavya smiled.

"Nothing special."

"Everyone likes something."

"I like gardens."

He laughed softly.

"That's not nothing special."

Kavya looked at him.

"I like watching butterflies."

Karthik glanced at a butterfly resting on a flower.

"That one?"

She smiled.

"Yes."

"Do you know what type it is?"

"No."

"You don't need to know?"

"No."

He smiled.

"Fair enough."

Their conversation continued.

Books.

College.

Work.

Family.

Life.

There was nothing dramatic. Nothing extraordinary.

Yet when Karthik returned inside, he had already made his decision.

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His parents later asked him quietly.

"What do you think?"

"I like her."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Kavya's father also asked her.

"Do you like him?"

Kavya thought for a moment.

"Yes."

"Any reason to say no?"

She shook her head.

"No."

But there was one reason she had not told him.

The city. The garden. The butterflies.

THE SECRET FEAR

The marriage was fixed.

Three months later.

The engagement would happen within two weeks.

Everything moved quickly. Relatives became busy.

Wedding clothes were selected. Jewelry was purchased.

Invitations were discussed. Dates were confirmed.

Kavya smiled through everything. But every night, she counted the remaining days.

Not because she was afraid of marriage. Because she knew she was going to leave.

She would leave the house. She would leave her room.

She would leave the garden. And she would leave the butterflies.

Sometimes she stood in the garden and whispered,

"I don't know when I will see you again."

The butterflies, unaware of human worries, continued flying.

One evening, she sat on the grass for a long time.

Her father came and sat beside her.

"You are quiet."

"I am okay."

"You don't have to pretend with me."

Kavya lowered her head.

"I am scared."

"Of Karthik?"

"No."

"Then?"

She pointed toward the garden and the flying butterflies.

"I don't want to leave this."

Her father smiled.

"Is that all?"

"All?"

"You think we don't know how much you love this place?"

Kavya smiled sadly.

"What if I don't get a garden there?"

Her father placed his hand on her head.

"Then perhaps life will surprise you."

She looked at him.

"How?"

"You will know when the time comes."

Kavya did not understand. But her father did.

He had already spoken to Karthik.

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THREE MONTHS

The next three months passed quickly. The engagement happened.

Karthik and Kavya began speaking more often.

Their conversations slowly became comfortable.

He would call after work.

"Did you eat?"

"Yes."

"What did you do today?"

"Nothing special."

"Garden?"

"Of course."

"How many butterflies today?"

Kavya laughed.

"I didn't count."

"You should."

"Why?"

"So I know how many friends you have."

She smiled.

Karthik had started asking about the garden regularly.

But he never asked too many questions. He never made fun of her attachment to it.

He never told her she would have to forget it. Instead, he listened.

Sometimes he would ask,

"What flowers are there?"

"Many."

"Which is your favorite?"

"I don't know."

"You don't have a favorite?"

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"I like all of them."

Karthik smiled.

"You are difficult."

"Why?"

"Because I can't buy you one flower."

"Why would you buy me one?"

"Because if I buy one, you will say you like all of them."

Kavya laughed.

The fear inside her slowly became smaller. But it never disappeared completely.

THE WEDDING DAY

The wedding day arrived. The village was filled with relatives.

The house was decorated. There were flowers at the entrance.

Music filled the air. People moved from one place to another.

Kavya was dressed as a bride.Her parents looked at her with pride and emotion.

She smiled. She cried. She laughed. She received blessings.

And finally, the marriage was completed. Karthik became her husband. The rituals continued.

Relatives gathered. Photographs were taken.

People spoke.

But eventually came the moment Kavya had been thinking about for months.

She had to leave.

ONE LAST VISIT

As part of the family ritual, Kavya returned to her home after the wedding.

She was still wearing her wedding dress. She entered the house with Karthik. She went to the prayer area.

She lit the diya before God. She folded her hands.

Her eyes filled with tears. Then she turned. She looked toward the garden. The garden was waiting.



She walked toward it.

Karthik followed. Kavya stood silently.

She looked at every plant. Every flower. Every corner.

The mat was still there. Her old place beneath the tree was still there.

A butterfly flew past her.

She smiled through her tears.

"Come," she whispered.

Karthik watched.

Her mother brought them two cups of coffee.

"Have coffee before you leave."

They sat together in the garden. Kavya held the cup in both hands. She looked at the flowers. Karthik looked at her.

"You will come again," he said.

She nodded.

"Of course."

But both knew that things would be different.

She would not return every evening. She would not sleep under this roof every night.

She would not wake up hearing the same sounds. She would not sit on the grass every day.

She finished her coffee. Then she stood. She looked around one last time.

A butterfly landed on a flower.

Kavya smiled.

"Take care," she whispered.

Karthik heard her. He didn't say anything. He simply held her hand. Together, they left.

THE CITY

The city was everything Kavya had feared.

Traffic. Noise. Tall buildings. Crowded roads.

People walking quickly. Cars moving constantly.

Buildings standing one beside another. There were no large open spaces around their home.

Karthik's existing accommodation was comfortable, but it was nothing like her village house.

Kavya adjusted. She tried. She arranged their home. She learned the nearby roads.

She got used to the city sounds. But sometimes, in the evening, she stood near the window.

There were no butterflies. She missed them.

Karthik noticed.

One evening he came home from work. Kavya was standing near the window.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

He knew that answer.

"The garden?"

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She smiled.

"How did you know?"

"You always look outside at this time."

She turned toward him.

"I miss it."

Karthik nodded and said, "I know."

She looked at him.

"You know?"

"Yes."

She smiled faintly.

"Sometimes I think I made a mistake."

Karthik became serious.

"About marrying me?"

She immediately shook her head.

"No."

"Then?"

"About leaving the garden."

Karthik smiled.

"Give me some time."

"For what?"

"You will see."

She looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you planning?"

"Nothing."

"You're hiding something."

"I'm not telling you."

She laughed.

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For the first time in several days, the sadness on her face disappeared.

THE SURPRISE

A few weeks later, Karthik came home unusually excited.

"Kavya."

"Hmm?"

"I have something to tell you."

"What?"

" We are going to buy a flat."

She looked surprised.

"A flat?"

"Yes."

"Why suddenly?"

"I have been planning for some time."

"Where?"

"In a gated community."

Kavya smiled.

"That is good."

"It is a little different."

"How?"

"The building has five floors."

She listened.

"I am planning to buy the flat on the fifth floor."

She nodded and said, "Okay."

Karthik paused.

"The fifth floor is the top floor."

She smiled.

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"Yes."

"There will be a terrace above our flat."

Kavya nodded. Then Karthik said,

"And we can use part of that terrace."

She looked at him.

"For what?"

He smiled.

"To make a garden."

Kavya froze.

For a few seconds, she could not speak. Karthik continued.

"A proper little garden."

Her eyes slowly filled with tears.

"We can put flowering plants there."

She stared at him.

"Different plants."

She blinked.

"Maybe some small trees."

Her lips trembled.

"And..."

He paused.

"...the butterflies will come."

A tear rolled down to Kavya's cheek.

She quickly wiped it.

Karthik smiled.

"Why are you crying?"

She could not answer.

"Do you like the idea?"

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She nodded.

"Then why are you crying?"

She finally spoke."How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"About the butterflies."

Karthik looked at her and said, "I know you love them."

"But how?"

He smiled.

"Do you remember the day I came to see you?"

"Yes."

"After our parents asked us to talk, I had to make a phone call to my manager."

Kavya nodded.

"I came to the backside of your house."

She looked at him.

"And I saw the beautiful garden again."

Karthik's voice softened.

"I had never seen anything like it."

He paused.

"The plants were so natural. The fragrance in the air was wonderful. There was no noise. Just greenery."

Kavya listened.

"I stood there for a few more minutes."

"And then?"

"I saw the butterflies."

Her eyes filled again.

"I understood then."

"What?"

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"Why you loved that place."

Karthik smiled.

"Your father also told me that you were very attached to the garden."

Kavya covered her face for a moment.

"He told you?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Kavya can live anywhere, but don't take away her garden.'"

Kavya laughed through her tears.

"Amma told me that my father would know."

"He did."

Karthik moved closer.

"I decided that day itself."

"Decided what?"

"If I ever bought a home, it should have space for your garden."

Kavya stared at him.

"But you didn't know you would get a terrace."

"No."

He smiled.

"I was lucky."

THE FIFTH FLOOR

The flat was purchased. It was not enormous.

It did not need to be. It had everything they needed.

A comfortable living room.

A kitchen. Bedrooms. Windows that allowed sunlight to enter.

But for Kavya, the most important part was above them.

The terrace.

Because their flat was on the fifth and final floor, they did not have to climb several floors to reach it.

They simply walked one level up.

And there it was. A large open space beneath the sky.

The first time Kavya stepped onto the terrace, she stood completely still.

The city spread around her. Buildings stood in every direction.

But above her was the sky.

There was sunlight. There was wind.

There was space.

Karthik stood beside her.

"Well?"

Kavya looked around.

"It can become a garden."

He laughed.

"That's exactly what I was hoping you would say."

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BUILDING THE GARDEN

They began slowly.

They purchased pots. Then soil. Then plants. Flowering plants.

Fragrant plants. Small shrubs. Climbers. Herbs.

A few plants that Kavya remembered from her childhood.

She chose each one carefully.

Karthik carried the pots.

Kavya arranged them.



"Not there."

"Why?"

"It won't get enough sunlight."

"Okay."

"Put this one here."

"Here?"

"A little left."

"Now?"

"Yes."

They worked together. The terrace slowly changed.

What had been an empty concrete space became green.

Then colorful. Then fragrant.

And finally alive.

Kavya brought one small plant from her parents' house.

She held it carefully.

"This was in my garden."

Karthik helped her plant it. She touched the soil.

"This one will remind me of home."

Karthik smiled and said, "It is home."

She looked at him and said, “Yes indeed"

WAITING FOR THE BUTTERFLIES

The garden was ready. But there was one problem.

No butterflies.

Kavya waited.

One day.

Two days.

A week.....Nothing.

Karthik teased her, "Maybe they don't know your address."

She frowned.

"They will come."

"How are you so sure?"

"They always came before."

"This is the city."

"They will still come."

Karthik smiled.

"I hope so."

Kavya watered the plants every morning. She spoke to them. She cared for them.

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She waited.

Then one evening, as the sun was beginning to set, something moved near a flowering plant.

Kavya stopped. Her eyes widened.

"Karthik!"

He came running and asked, "What happened?"

She pointed. A small yellow butterfly was resting on a flower.

Karthik smiled.

Kavya stood completely still. The butterfly opened its wings.

Closed them. Opened them again. Then another butterfly appeared.

Kavya's eyes filled with tears.

"They came."

Karthik stood beside her.



Kartheek said, "I told you."

She shook her head.

"No."

"What?"

"You didn't bring them."

"Then who did?"

She smiled.

"Maybe they followed me."

THE GARDEN ABOVE THE CITY

Months passed.

The terrace became beautiful. More butterflies began to visit.

Yellow. White. Orange. Sometimes blue.

Kavya began spending her evenings there again.

Just as she had done in the village. She placed a mat on the terrace.

Opened her books. Later, when she had no books to study, she carried a cup of coffee.

Karthik sometimes joined her. They would sit together.

The city lights would slowly appear below them. The traffic would continue.

People would continue moving. Buildings would remain crowded.

But above all of it was their little garden. Their private world.

One evening, Karthik brought two cups of coffee.

He handed one to Kavya.

She smiled.

"Thank you."

He sat beside her.

"Does this remind you of your old garden?"

Kavya looked around.

"It is not the same."

Karthik's face changed slightly.

"Not the same?"

She smiled and said, "No."

He waited and said, "This is better."

"Why?"

She looked at him.

"Because my old garden gave me butterflies."

She paused.

"This garden gave me you."

Karthik smiled.

"You had me before this garden."

"I know."

"Then?"

She looked toward the city.

"I mean... you gave me my garden back."

He became silent.

Kavya rested her head gently against his shoulder.

"I was afraid that marriage would take something away from me."

Karthik looked at her.

"But it didn't."

"No."

She smiled.

"It gave me something I never imagined."

"What?"

"A garden above the city."

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HER FATHER'S VISIT

Some months later, Kavya's parents visited them.

Her father stepped onto the terrace.

He stopped. He looked around.

Green plants everywhere.

Flowers. Climbers. Small trees. Butterflies.

His daughter standing among them.

He smiled.

"You did it."

Karthik laughed.

"I only helped."

Kavya's father looked at him.

"No."

He placed his hand on Karthik's shoulder.

"You understood her."

Karthik smiled.

Kavya's mother walked around the garden.

"These plants..."

Kavya pointed.

"That one is from our old garden."

Her mother touched it.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Her father looked at the butterflies.

"I never thought she would find this in a city."

Karthik answered quietly.

"Neither did I."

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Kavya looked at her father.

"You remember what you told me?"

"What?"

"You said life would surprise me."

He smiled.

"It did."

Kavya looked at Karthik.

"Yes."

THE SAME EVENING

That evening, after her parents had left, Kavya and Karthik sat on the terrace.

The sky was slowly turning dark. The first stars appeared.

A butterfly rested on a flower. Kavya watched it.

Karthik watched Kavya.

After a while he asked,

"What are you thinking?"

She smiled.

"I was thinking about my childhood."

"What about it?"

"I used to sit in my garden every evening."

"I know."

"My mother would bring me milk."

"Now she would bring coffee."

Kavya laughed.

"My school books became college books."

"And now?"

"Now there are no books."

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"So what changed?"

She looked at him.

"Everything changed."

Then she looked at the garden.

"But the important things stayed."

Karthik nodded.

"Maybe that's what growing up is."

"What?"

"Learning that you don't always have to leave everything behind."

Kavya smiled.

"You sound wise."

"I am."

She laughed.

"You are not."

"I bought you a garden."

"That doesn't make you wise."

"It makes me a good husband."

She smiled.

"Maybe."

YEARS LATER

Years passed. The garden grew.

Some plants died. New plants replaced them.

Some flowers bloomed only during certain seasons.

Others remained throughout the year.

The butterflies continued to visit. Kavya learned to recognize them.

She still did not know all their names. She did not care. Karthik sometimes came home tired from work.

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But if he could not find Kavya inside, he knew where she would be.

On the terrace. Among the plants. Watching the butterflies.

Sometimes he joined her. Sometimes he simply watched her from the doorway. He had learned something important.

A person's happiness was not always found in expensive things.

Sometimes happiness was a cup of coffee. Sometimes it was a patch of grass.

Sometimes it was a familiar flower. Sometimes it was a butterfly.

And sometimes, happiness was simply knowing that the person you loved was happy.

THE LITTLE GIRL WHO NEVER LEFT

One evening, many years after their marriage, Kavya was sitting on the terrace.

Her hair had grown slightly longer. There were a few strands of silver now.

Karthik sat beside her. She watched a butterfly moving between two flowers.

He asked,

"Do you still remember your old garden?"

Kavya smiled.

"Every day."

"Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes."

"What do you miss most?"

She thought for a moment and said, "The little girl I was there."

Karthik looked at her.

"What do you mean?"

"I was so happy without needing anything."

She touched the soil beside her.

"I used to think I had to leave all of that behind when I got married."

She smiled and said, "But I didn't."

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"No."

Karthik shook his head.

"You brought that girl with you."

Kavya looked at him. He pointed toward the garden.

"She's still sitting there."

Kavya smiled.

"Where?"

"In the middle of all those butterflies."

She laughed softly.

Then she looked around. The city was glowing below them.

Cars moved like tiny streams of light. Buildings stood tall.

The world was busy. But their terrace remained peaceful.

A small green island above the concrete city.

Kavya held Karthik's hand.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not asking me to forget."

He squeezed her hand.

"I never wanted you to forget."

"What did you want?"

He looked at her.

"I wanted to know what made you happy."

She smiled and said, "And you found out?"

"On the first day."

"When you saw the garden?"

"Yes."

"And the butterflies?"

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"Especially the butterflies."

She laughed and said, "Then you were already in love with me?"

Karthik smiled.

"I liked you that day."

"And now?"

He looked at the garden.

"Now I love the woman who still gets excited every time a butterfly comes."

Kavya's eyes filled with tears.

She leaned against his shoulder. A butterfly flew past them.

Then another. Then another. Neither spoke.

There was nothing left to say.

THE GARDEN WAS NEVER JUST A GARDEN

People who visited their home often admired the terrace.

"What a beautiful garden."

Some asked Kavya how she maintained it.

Others wanted to know where she bought the plants. Children came to watch the butterflies.

Neighbors began growing plants of their own. The terrace slowly became known in the community.

But Kavya knew the garden was much more than plants and flowers.

It was her childhood. It was her mother's evening coffee. It was her school homework. It was her college years.

It was every difficult evening she had survived. It was the place where she had learned to be patient.

It was the place where she had learned that beautiful things could not be forced.

A flower opened when it was ready. A butterfly arrived when it wanted.

The garden had taught her something without ever speaking.

And later, Karthik had taught her something else. Love was not always about asking someone to change.

Sometimes love meant understanding what should never be taken away.

Sometimes love meant carrying a person's happiness into a new place.

Sometimes love meant noticing the small things that others might consider unimportant.

Karthik had not simply bought a flat for Kavya.

He had bought her a piece of the life she was afraid of losing.

And Kavya had not simply brought plants to the terrace.

She had brought a little piece of her village into the middle of the city.

THE LAST BUTTERFLY OF THE EVENING

One evening, Kavya and Karthik were sitting together after sunset.

The garden was quiet.

Most of the butterflies had already disappeared. Kavya looked around.

"Where did they all go?"

"Tomorrow they'll come again."

She nodded. A small butterfly suddenly appeared.

It flew around them once. Then it settled on a flower.

Kavya smiled.

"Look."

Karthik looked.

"One is still here."

"Maybe it doesn't want to leave."

"Why?"

She thought for a moment and said, "Maybe it knows I don't like goodbyes."

Karthik smiled.

"Then it can stay."

They sat quietly. The butterfly remained on the flower.

The city lights shone below. The breeze moved gently through the plants.

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And Kavya realized something.

She had spent years believing that one day life would force her to choose.

Her garden or her marriage. Her village or the city. Her childhood or her future. But life had not asked her to choose.

Instead, it had given her something better.

It had given her someone who understood that her happiness was made of little things.

A garden.

Flowers.

Coffee.

Evening sunlight.

And butterflies. She turned toward Karthik.

"Do you remember what you told me when you first came here?"

"What?"

"You said this garden was beautiful."

"It was."

Kavya smiled.

"It still is."

Karthik looked around.

"Yes."

She shook her head.

"No."

He looked at her.

"The garden is beautiful."

She paused and said, "But what made it beautiful was the fact that you understood why I loved it."

Karthik smiled. He held her hand.

Above them, the sky was filled with stars.

Below them, the city continued its restless life.

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And between the sky and the city stood a little garden.

A garden that had begun in a remote village.

A garden that had traveled with a young bride in her heart.

A garden that had found a new home on the fifth floor of a city building.

And in that garden, butterflies continued to arrive. Just as they always had.

Because some things in life are not meant to be left behind.

They are meant to be carried forward.

And sometimes… the most beautiful form of love is simply this:

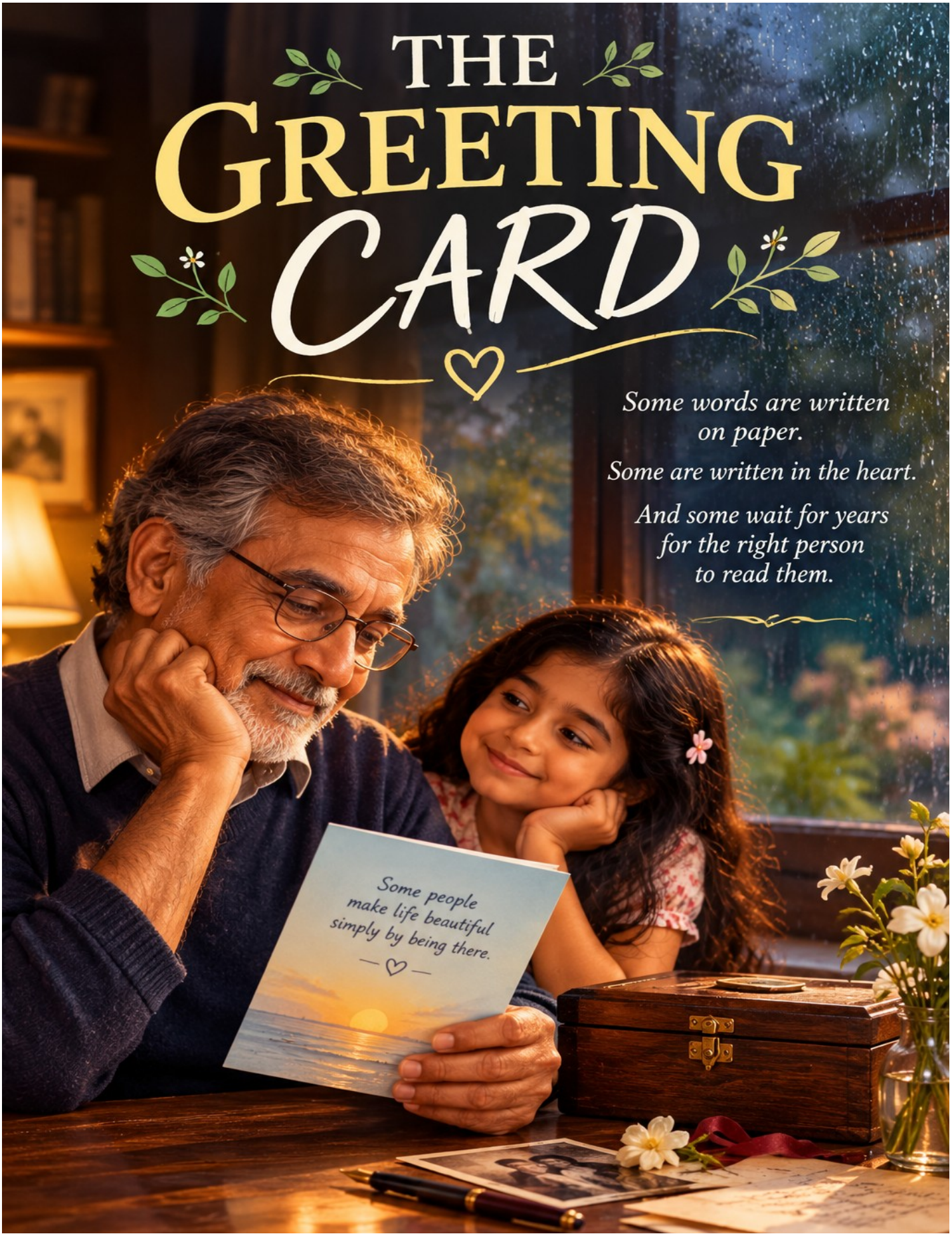
to know what makes someone happy,

and then make sure they never have to live without it.

****

Comments can be sent to :vinodkesamudram@gmail.com

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THE GREETING CARD
Some words are written on paper.
Some are written in the heart.
And some wait for years for the right person to read them.
Some people make life beautiful simply by being there.

Some words are written on paper. Some are written in the heart. And some wait for years for the right person to read them.

The rain had been falling since afternoon.

Not heavily. Not dramatically.

It was the kind of rain that seemed to have nowhere else to go.

It tapped gently against the windows, gathered on the balcony railing, slipped down the glass, and disappeared. The sky was grey, the roads were wet, and the city seemed quieter than usual.

Inside a small house at the end of a narrow street, seventy-two-year-old **Raghav Rao** sat alone at his dining table.

In front of him was an old wooden box. It was not an expensive box.

The polish had disappeared from most of its surface. One corner was slightly broken. The brass lock had lost its shine.

But Raghav never threw it away.

For nearly forty years, he had kept the box exactly where it was.

Today, for the first time in many years, he had opened it.

He slowly removed the things inside.

An old fountain pen.

A black-and-white photograph.

A railway ticket...A child's tiny hair ribbon.

A dried jasmine flower.

A few handwritten letters.

And finally— a greeting card.

Raghav stopped.

His fingers trembled slightly as he picked it up.

The card was pale blue. There was a small picture of a sunrise on the front.

The words were simple.

“Some people make life beautiful simply by being there.”

Raghav stared at those words for a long time.

Then he turned the card over.

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On the back, in his own handwriting, were five words.

“For my daughter, Sharanya.”

He closed his eyes. Forty-three years had passed. But the memory had never faded.

1

Raghav had never been a man of many words. He was an accountant in a government office.

Every morning at 8:15, he left home. Every evening at 6:20, he returned.

He had a simple life. A small house.

A loving wife, **Meera**.

And their only child, **Sharanya**.

Sharanya was eight years old when Raghav bought the greeting card.



She was a lively child who believed that every ordinary day could become special.

If her father came home five minutes early, she celebrated.

If her mother made her favourite dosa, she celebrated.

If it rained on a Sunday, she celebrated.

If a neighbour's puppy came into their compound, she celebrated.

Raghav often watched her from a distance. He loved his daughter deeply. But he rarely said it.

He believed providing for the family was enough.

School fees.

Books.

Clothes.

Medical expenses. Everything was his responsibility.

Love, in his mind, was something that did not need to be spoken.

Sharanya thought differently.

One evening, she came running into the house holding a small piece of paper.

“Daddy!”

Raghav looked up from his newspaper.

“What?”

“Write something for me.”

“What should I write?”

She handed him the paper.

“Anything.”

Raghav smiled.

“What is this?”

“A card.”

“Card?”

“Yes. Teacher told us that tomorrow is Parents' Day. Everyone has to give something to their parents.”

Raghav looked at the blank paper.

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“You write.”

“I want Daddy to write.”

He took the pen.

After thinking for a few seconds, he wrote:

“Study well. Be a good girl.”

Sharanya read it.

She looked disappointed.

“That is all?”

Raghav laughed.

“What else should I write?”

“Something nice.”

“I have written something nice.”

“No, Daddy.”

She folded her arms.

“Something from your heart.”

Raghav looked at her.

For some reason, that sentence stayed with him. Something from your heart.

That night, after everyone slept, Raghav sat at the dining table.

He took another piece of paper. He tried writing. He tore it.

He tried again. He tore that one too. Finally, he went to a stationery shop the next morning.

That was when he saw the pale-blue greeting card. He picked it up.

Read the words. And bought it.

2

He brought the card home and kept it safely inside the wooden box.

He planned to give it to Sharanya that evening. But life had other plans. That afternoon, Raghav's manager called him.

“Raghav, I need you to stay late today.”

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“How late, sir?”

“Maybe 9.”

Raghav looked at the clock. His daughter's Parents' Day programme was at 7.

“Sir, I have to go home.”

The manager frowned and said, “Everyone has responsibilities, Raghav.”

Raghav said nothing. He stayed.

At 9:40, he finally reached home.

The house was dark. Sharanya was asleep. Meera was sitting beside her.

“She waited for you,” Meera said quietly.

Raghav looked at his daughter.

“Did she ask for me?”

“Many times.”

Raghav took the card from his pocket.

He looked at it.

Then at Sharanya.

He thought—

Tomorrow.

He put the card into the wooden box. He would give it to her tomorrow.

But tomorrow became another tomorrow. Then another.

School examinations came. Sharanya fell sick.

Raghav's office became busy. Meera's mother needed medical treatment.

The family had financial difficulties. Life kept moving. And the greeting card stayed inside the box.

3

Years passed. Sharanya grew older.

At seventeen, she became quiet. Not unhappy. Just distant.

She had begun to understand that her father loved her.

But she had also begun to understand that he didn't know how to show it.

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One evening, she stood near the doorway while Raghav was checking some bills.

“Daddy?”

“Hm?”

“Do you love me?”

Raghav stopped.

The question surprised him.

“Why are you asking?”

“Just asking.”

“Of course.”

“How much?”

Raghav smiled.

“Why do you need measurements for everything?”

Sharanya didn't smile.

“Sometimes I feel you don't care.”

Raghav put down the papers.

“I work for you.”

“I know.”

“I pay for your education.”

“I know.”

“I have never allowed you to go without anything you needed.”

“I know.”

“Then why do you say I don't care?”

Sharanya looked at him.

“Because I know what you do for me.”

She paused.

“I just don't know what you feel for me.”

Raghav had no answer.

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She walked away. That night, he opened the wooden box.

The pale-blue greeting card was still there.

He held it. He thought about giving it to her.

But suddenly it felt childish. She was seventeen now.

Perhaps she had grown beyond such things. So he put it back.

4

At twenty-two, Sharanya goes to interview in Bangalore.

All rounds she clears and received a job offer in Bengaluru.

She gets excited.

She called Raghav and shared good news.



Raghav feel happy initially but was worried.

“Do you have to go so far?”

“Daddy, it's a good company.”

“You can find something here.”

“I don't want something here.”

“You'll be alone.”

“I'll manage.”

Raghav said nothing.

On the morning she left, he stood outside the house with her suitcase.

Meera hugged her. Raghav simply said:

“Take care.”

Sharanya waited. She expected something more.

Perhaps a hug. erhaps—

I will miss you.

Perhaps—

Come back soon.

But Raghav only adjusted the handle of her suitcase.

“Call when you reach.”

She nodded.

The bus left.

Raghav stood there until it disappeared. That evening, he opened the wooden box again.

He took out the card. He wrote on the back:

“I wanted to tell you today that I am proud of you.”

He stopped. Then he added:

“But I couldn't.”

He closed the box.

Bengaluru changed Sharanya. She became independent. She built a career.

She made friends. She travelled. She learned to make decisions without asking anyone.

Raghav was proud. But pride was something he carried silently.

Whenever relatives asked about Sharanya, he would say:

“She is doing well.”

And his face would brighten. He saved every photograph she sent.

He kept her first salary envelope. He kept an old birthday card she had made when she was nine.

He even kept the ticket from the bus she had taken to Bengaluru.

The wooden box was becoming a museum of things he could not say.

6

Then came the day Sharanya called.

“Daddy?”

“Yes?”

“I want to get married to a guy.”

Raghav became silent.

“With whom?”

“His name is Arjun.”

“What does he do?”

They spoke for almost an hour. After the call ended, Raghav sat quietly.

Meera came into the room and asked, “What happened?”

“She is wanted to married and groom is ready.”

Meera smiled.

“I know.”

“You knew?”

“She told me last week.”

Raghav looked offended.

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“She told you before me?”

Meera laughed.

“You don't answer your phone properly. Why would she tell you first?”

Raghav smiled.

That night, he opened the wooden box.

The greeting card was still there. He looked at it.

Then he finally made a decision. He would give it to Sharanya on her wedding day.

7

The wedding was beautiful. Raghav watched his daughter walk toward the stage.

She was wearing a red silk saree.

For a moment, he saw the eight-year-old girl running through the same house.

The child who had asked him to write something from his heart.

The girl who had waited for him on Parents' Day.

The teenager who had once asked:

Do you love me?

Raghav's eyes filled with tears.

During the farewell, Sharanya hugged her mother.

Then she turned to her father.

Raghav stood still. She hugged him.

For a few seconds, he couldn't move.

Then he held her tightly.

“I am proud of you,” he whispered.

Sharanya pulled away. She looked at him.

“What did you say?”

Raghav smiled.

“Nothing.”

She smiled too. The moment passed.

But that night, after everyone had left, Raghav sat alone in his room.

He took out the card. He wrote:

“Today I finally told you what I should have told you many years ago.”

Then he folded the card.



He still didn't give it to her. He tried a lot to give to her but could not give.

8

Life moved forward. Sharanya and Arjun settled in Bengaluru.

Two years later, they had a daughter. They named her **Tara**.

Raghav became a grandfather. And something changed in him.

He became talkative. He sang. He told stories. He played with Tara.

He let her climb onto his shoulders. He bought her toys without Meera knowing.

He allowed her to eat sweets before dinner Sharanya watched him one evening.

“Daddy.”

“Hm?”

“You never behaved like this with me.”

Raghav laughed and said, “Grandchildren have different rules.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because grandparents are allowed to spoil them.”

Sharanya smiled. But deep inside, she wondered:

Why couldn't he have been like this with me?

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9

Tara was five when she discovered the wooden box.

She had been searching for crayons. She found the box under Raghav's bed.

“Grandpa!”

Raghav came running.

“What happened?”

“What is inside this?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you scared?”

Raghav laughed.

“I'm not scared.”

“Open it.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“No.”

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Tara sat on the floor.

“I won't move until you open it.”

Raghav looked at her. She had inherited Sharanya stubbornness.

He opened the box. Tara examined everything.

“What is this?”

“Old photograph.”

“What is this?”

“Railway ticket.”

“This?”

“My pen.”

“And this?”

She picked up the pale-blue greeting card.

Raghav's face changed.

“Put it back.”

“Who is it for?”

“No one.”

Tara turned it around. She saw the writing.

For my daughter, Sharanya.

“Mommy!”

Raghav quickly took the card from her.

“Don't tell your mother.”

“Why?”

“It's private.”

Tara nodded seriously. Then she whispered:

“I won't tell.”

10

But children are not good at keeping secrets.

That evening, Tara ran to Sharanya.

“Mommy!”

“Yes?”

“Grandpa has a secret card for you.”

Sharanya looked at her father.

Raghav froze.

“What card?”

Sharanya asked. Raghav said nothing.

Tara pointed toward his room.

“The blue one.”

Sharanya walked to him.

“Daddy?”

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Raghav looked down.

“It's nothing.”

“Can I see it?”

He hesitated. Then he handed it to her.

Sharanya opened the card.

She read the sentence on the front.

Some people make life beautiful simply by being there.

Her eyes filled with tears. She opened it.

Inside, there were years of handwriting.

Not one message.... Many were there..

Small notes written at different times.

One said:

“Today Sharanya got her first job. I wanted to tell her I am proud.”

Another:

“Today she left for Bengaluru. The house feels empty.”

Another:

“Today my daughter got married. I could not stop my tears.”

Another:

“Today Tara called me Grandpa. I have never heard a sweeter word.”

And at the bottom:

“I don't know why I kept postponing saying these things. Perhaps I thought there would always be another day.”

Sharanya stopped reading.

She looked at her father.

“Daddy...”

Raghav couldn't meet her eyes.

“Why didn't you give it to me?”

Raghav smiled sadly.

“I don't know.”

“You bought this when?”

“Long ago.”

“How long?”

“Before you were ten.”

Sharanya stared at him.

“Daddy...”

He looked at her.

“I thought I had time.”

That sentence broke something inside her. She sat beside him.

“Do you remember when I asked you if you loved me?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you didn't.”

Raghav's eyes became wet.

“I loved you more than anything.”

“Then why didn't you say it?”

He took a breath.

“I was raised to believe that a father's love is shown through responsibility.”

He looked at his hands.

“I didn't understand that children also need to hear it.”

Sharanya cried quietly.

Raghav continued.

“Every time I wanted to say something, I thought I would say it tomorrow.”

He looked at the card.

“Tomorrow became forty-three years.”

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e-magazine

Sharanya placed her hand on his.

“Daddy…”

He looked at her.

“I should have told you too.”

“What?”

“That I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That you loved me.”

Raghav's eyes filled again.

“Then why did you ask?”

“Because sometimes knowing isn't enough.”

She smiled through her tears.

“Sometimes we need to hear it.”

Raghav nodded.

“Yes.”

Tara was standing at the doorway.

She had been listening.

“Grandpa?”

Both turned.

“Yes?”

“Are you crying?”

Raghav wiped his eyes.

“No.”

“You are.”

Sharanya laughed.

Tara came and sat between them.

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“Why?”

Raghav looked at his grand daughter.

“Because some people wait too long to say important things.”

Tara thought about it. Then she asked:

“What important thing?”

Raghav smiled.

“That we love each other.”

Tara immediately hugged both of them.

“Then say it now.”

Sharanya laughed…. Raghav laughed too.

And for the first time in forty-three years, the greeting card had done what it was meant to do.

It had brought people closer.

13

The next morning, Sharanya woke up early. She went to the stationery shop near her parents' house.

She bought a greeting card. Then another. Then another.

She returned home with three. Raghav looked at them.

“What are those?”

“Cards.”

“For whom?”

She handed him one.

“Read it.”

Raghav opened it. Inside were six words.

“Thank you for being my father.”

He looked at her.

She handed him the second.

“I am proud to be your daughter.”

Then the third.

“I love you, Daddy.”

Raghav couldn't speak.

He simply hugged her.

Sometimes a person doesn't need a long speech.

Sometimes six words are enough.

14

A few months later, Raghav's health began to weaken.

Nothing dramatic.

He simply became tired more easily.

He stopped going for his morning walks.

He spent more time sitting near the window.

Tara visited every weekend.

She would sit beside him and ask for stories.

“Tell me about Mommy when she was small.”

Raghav smiled.

“Your mother was very naughty.”

“I was not!”

Sharanya would shout from the kitchen.

Tara would laugh.

“Tell me more!”

Raghav would continue.

“She once broke a window while playing cricket.”

“Daddy!”

“She blamed the cat.”

“Daddy!”

“She also once…”

“Enough!”

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The house filled with laughter.

The greeting card remained on Raghav's bedside table.

Not inside the box anymore. He no longer wanted to hide it.

15

One Sunday morning, Tara brought a blank sheet of paper.

“Grandpa.”

“Yes?”

“I am making a card for you.”

Raghav smiled.

But he tells to give it to her mom as the mothers’day was about to come.

He also tells her to keep it a, “Secret.”

“Why?”

“Because cards are supposed to be surprises.”

She sat on the floor.

For nearly half an hour, she wrote and drew.

Then she folded the paper.

“Don't open it I will give it to mom.”

Raghav nodded.

Tara ran outside.

He opened it immediately.

It was beautiful greeting card.

The additional designs were added to made the greeting card even more beautiful.

He looked every corner of it.

Even the corners also bordered with beautifull designs.

He wondered to the skill of his grand daughter and for the affection on her mother.

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Inside was a drawing of two people holding hands.

Mommy.

Tara.

Underneath, in large uneven letters, she had written:

“People who love each other should never wait to say it.”

Raghav stared at the sentence. His eyes became wet.

It felt very good. He appreciated tara very much.

He folded the paper carefully. Then placed it beside the old blue card.

Two cards.

Two generations.

One message.

16

That evening, Raghav called Sharanya

“Come here.”

“I am here.”

“Sit.”

She sat beside him. Tara gave greeting card to her mother.

She felt very happy and kissed her daughter on the cheeks.

Raghav pointed toward the two cards.

“Keep these.”

“Why?”

“I don't want them in the box anymore.”

Sharanya looked at him.

“Where should I keep them?”

“Wherever you can see them.”

“Why?”

“So you remember.”

“Remember what?”

Raghav smiled and said, “Don't wait.”

She understood.

He wasn't talking about greeting cards. He was talking about life.

17

Two weeks later, Raghav passed away peacefully in his sleep.

There was no dramatic goodbye. No final speech.

No warning. Just a quiet morning.

The house became silent.

Sharanya sat in her father's room for hours.

She opened the wooden box one last time. Inside were all the memories of a lifetime.

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The railway ticket.

The photograph.

The ribbon.The letters.

The old fountain pen.And now— nothing was missing.

Because the greeting card was no longer there. She had taken it.

18

Months later, Sharanya returned to Bengaluru.

She placed the pale-blue greeting card inside a wooden frame.

Beside it, she placed Tara's handwritten card.

The two cards hung next to each other on the living-room wall. Visitors often asked:

“Why did you frame such an old card?”

Sharanya always smiled.

“Because it taught me something.”

“What?”

She would look at the two cards.

“That love should not be postponed.”

19

Years passed. Tara grew up.

She became a teacher.

One day, her mother gave her the old greeting card.

“This belongs to you now.”

Tara read it again.

She had heard the story many times. But that day, she understood it differently.

She turned the card over. The handwriting was faded.

The paper was fragile. But the words remained.

She felt that she should be giving a card to her father and wanted to show how much she loved her father.

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She went to different greeting cards shops and selected one beautiful card.

She added some own designs to her. Then she put it inside an envelope.

She walked to her father's room. Her father was sitting near the window.

“Dad?”

He looked up.

“Yes?”

She handed him the envelope.



“What is this?”

“A greeting card.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to tell you something.”

He opened it. Inside were the words:

“Thank you for teaching me that the most important words should never be left for tomorrow. Happy father’s day”

Her father looked at her. Then hugged her. Neither said anything. They didn't need to.

20

Many years later, the pale-blue greeting card was still preserved.

The paper had become yellow.

The ink had faded.

The edges had become soft. But it survived. Not because it was valuable.

Not because it was rare.

But because it carried something far more precious than money.

A father's love…. A daughter's longing….. A granddaughter's wisdom.

And one simple truth:

We often assume the people we love already know how we feel.

Perhaps they do. But sometimes they need to hear it.

Sometimes they need to see it. Sometimes they need a hug.

Sometimes they need a letter.

Sometimes they need a simple greeting card.

Because life doesn't always give us another tomorrow.

The people we love may be sitting beside us today.

A father may be waiting for his son to call.

A mother may be waiting for her daughter to visit.

A husband may be waiting to hear “thank you.”

A wife may be waiting to hear “I am proud of you.”

A friend may be waiting for one simple message: *I haven't forgotten you*.

And somewhere, perhaps inside an old wooden box, there may be words that have been waiting for years.

Words that were meant to be spoken.

Words that were meant to be given.

Words that should never have been postponed.

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So—

write the card.

Make the call.

Say the words.

Not tomorrow.

Today.

Because a greeting card is only a piece of paper.

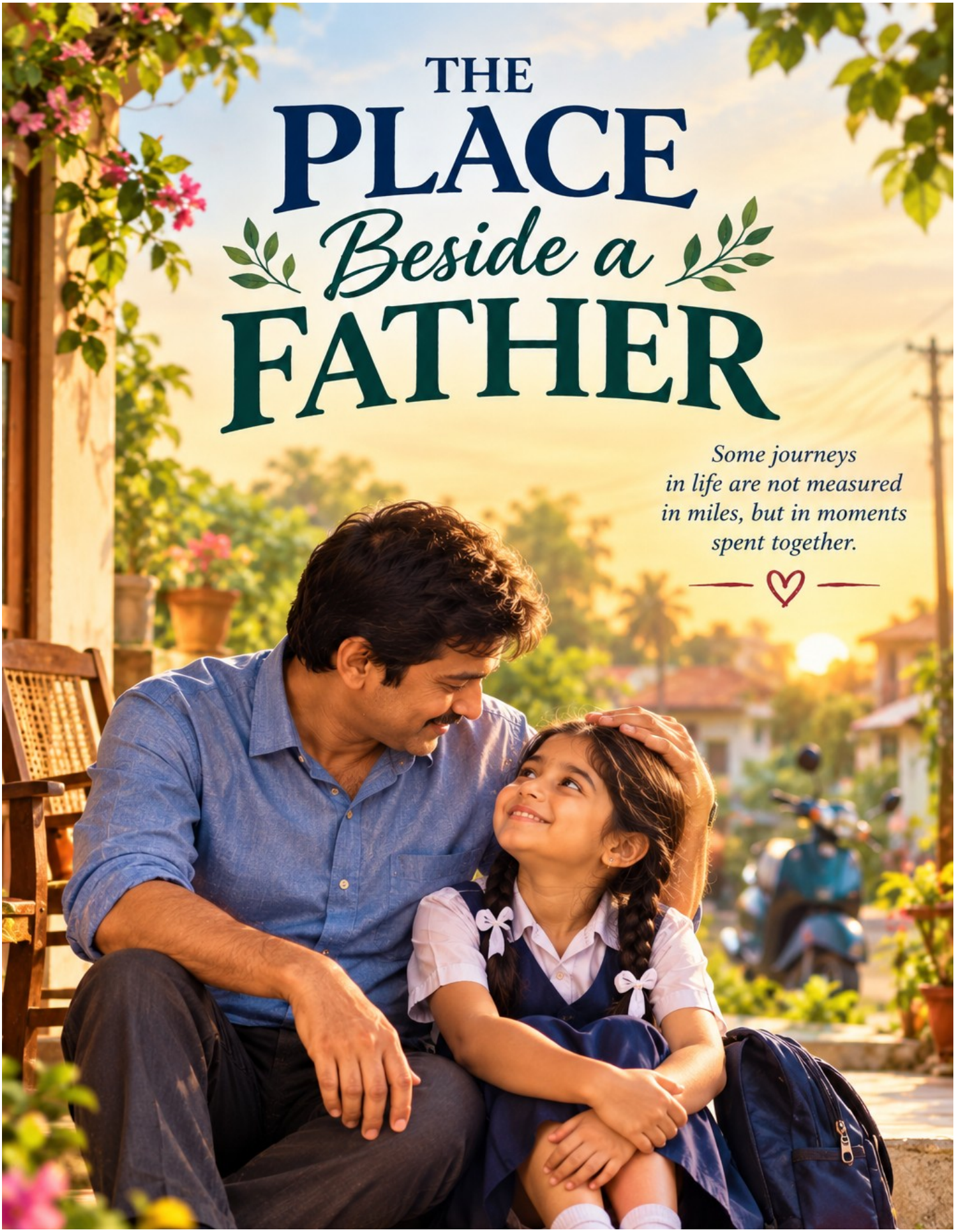
But sometimes—

it carries an entire lifetime of love.

****

Comments can be sent to :tsunil51@gmail.com

Bookwave
e-magazine


THE
PLACE
Beside a
FATHER
Some journeys
in life are not measured
in miles, but in moments
spent together.

The house stood at the end of a narrow street in a small town in Andhra Pradesh.

It was not a large house.

Two bedrooms....A small hall.

A kitchen where the morning sunlight entered through a little window.

And a veranda in front where a wooden chair had been placed for years.

The chair belonged to Mahendra. Everyone in the house knew it.

His wife, Parimala, never sat in it.

Even when Mahendra was away, she would dust it every morning but never use it.

Their daughter, Jyothi, used to call it—

“Appa's chair.”

Mahendra was forty-two when the story began.

He worked as an accounts manager in a private company in the nearby town.

His salary was enough to run the household. Not enough to make life luxurious.

But enough to make his family comfortable. He had one dream.

His daughter should never feel that she could not dream because her family could not afford it.

Jyothi was eight years old. She was a thin, lively little girl with two long plaits and a habit of asking questions.

Too many questions.

“Why does the moon follow us?”

“Why does rain smell good?”

“Why do people grow old?”

“Why do you go to office every day?”

“Why can't I come with you?”

“Why don't you ever buy anything for yourself?”

Mahendra had answers for some.

For others, he simply smiled.

One morning, Jyothi was sitting on the steps outside the house wearing her school uniform.

Her shoes were new. Her father had bought them the previous evening.

She was staring at them.

“Appa.”

“Yes?”

“These shoes are very costly, no?”

Mahendra looked at her.

“Who told you?”

“Amma.”

Parimala, who was packing lunch inside, immediately shouted,

“I only told her they were good shoes!”

Jyothi smiled.

Mahendra sat beside her.

“Do you like them?”

“Yes.”

“Then don't worry about the price.”

“But you said last month we should save money.”

“We should.”

“Then why did you buy these?”

Mahendra looked at her shoes.

“Because your feet should be comfortable when you walk towards your dreams.”

Jyothi didn't fully understand.

She only knew that her father had said something beautiful. She leaned against his shoulder.

“Then I will walk a lot.”

Mahendra laughed.

“Good.”

“Will you walk with me?”

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He looked at her and said, “For as long as you want me to.”

She smiled.

That morning, neither of them knew how important those words would become.

2

Mahendra took Jyothi to school every morning on his old scooter.



The scooter was more than ten years old. It made a strange sound whenever it started.

Tr-tr-tr-tr…

Jyothi loved it. She sat behind her father with her schoolbag between them.

Every morning, before starting, Mahendra would ask,

“Ready?”

And Jyothi would answer,

“Ready!”

Sometimes she would place both hands around his waist.

Sometimes she would hold only the side handle.

But whenever they crossed a busy road, she would automatically hold him tightly.

Mahendra noticed. He never mentioned it.

One morning, when they were waiting at a traffic signal, Jyothi asked,

“Appa?”

“Hmmm?”

“When I become big, will I have a scooter?”

“Definitely.”

“Will you buy one for me?”

“If I can.”

“What if you can't?”

“I'll teach you to ride mine.”

“But by then your scooter will be very old.”

Mahendra laughed.

“Then we will buy a new one.”

“With whose money?”

“Yours.”

“How?”

“You'll earn.”

Jyothi thought for a moment and said, “Then I'll buy you one also.”

Mahendra turned slightly.

“For me?”

“Yes.”

“What will you buy?”

“A big scooter.”

“Why?”

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“So you don't have to ride on this old one.”

Mahendra smiled.

“I'll wait.”

That became their little joke.

Whenever the scooter made a strange sound, Jyothi would say,

“Appa, your new scooter is waiting.”

And Mahendra would reply,

“Then study well.”

She would immediately become serious.

“Okay.”

3

Jyothi was an excellent student. Not because she always stood first.

She didn't. Sometimes she came first.

Sometimes third.

Once she came seventh and cried the entire evening.

Mahendra sat beside her.

“What happened?”

“I came seventh.”

“So?”

“Everyone will think I'm stupid.”

“Who?”

“My teacher.”

“Did your teacher say that?”

“No.”

“Your friends?”

“No.”

“Then who told you?”

Jyothi looked down.

“Myself.”

Mahendra smiled.

“Never become your own enemy.”

She looked at him.

“Then what should I do?”

“Become your own friend.”

“How?”

“Tell yourself, ‘I didn't do well this time.

I'll do better next time.’”

Jyothi nodded.

Mahendra pointed toward her books.

“Marks tell you how you performed in one examination.”

“And?”

“They don't tell you who you are.”

Those words stayed with her.

Years later, whenever she failed at something, she remembered them.

4

As Jyothi grew older, her questions changed. .At twelve, she wanted to know about the world.

At fifteen, she wanted to know about herself.. At seventeen, she wanted to know about the future.

And at eighteen, she wanted to know why her father sometimes became silent whenever she spoke about leaving home.

She had secured admission into an engineering college in another city.

It was a good college….A good opportunity…..But it meant living in a hostel.

When the admission letter arrived, Jyothi ran into the house.

“Appa!”

Mahendra was reading the newspaper.

“What?”

“I got it!”

He stood immediately.

“Really?”

She handed him the letter.

He read it. His eyes filled with pride.

“Congratulations.”

She hugged him.

“I'm going!”

He smiled.

“Yes.”

But that night, after everyone slept, Mahendra sat alone in his wooden chair in the veranda.

Parimala came outside.

“You are happy, aren't you?”

“Very happy.”

“Then why are you sitting like this?”

Mahendra looked at the dark street.

“She is leaving.”

Parimala smiled.

“She is not leaving us.”

“I know.”

“She is only going to study.”

“I know.”

“She will come back.”

“I know.”

Parimala sat beside him and said, “Then?”

Mahendra took a deep breath.

“When she was small, I used to worry about whether she would ever be able to walk without holding my hand.”

He smiled sadly.

“Now I'm worrying because she can.”

Parimala placed her hand over his.

“You taught her to walk.”

“Yes.”

“Then trust what you taught her.”

Mahendra looked at his wife….. She was right.

5

Mahendra took jyothi to College and completes joining formalities.



He blessed his daughter for her achievement.

After a week the college started.

The day Jyothi left for college was one of the hardest days of Mahendra's life. He carried her luggage to the bus.

Checked her ticket three times. Checked her wallet twice.

Checked whether she had water. Then checked the water bottle again.

“Appa.”

“What?”

“You already checked that.”

“I know.”

“You checked it ten minutes ago.”

“I know.”

She smiled.

“You are nervous.”

“No.”

“You are.”

“I'm not.”

She laughed.

Then suddenly became quiet.

“Appa.”

“Hmmm?”

“I'll call you every day.”

“Good.”

“Don't worry.”

“I won't.”

“Don't miss me.”

“I won't.”

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e-magazine

She looked at him.

“You are lying.”

Mahendra smiled.

“A little.”

The bus arrived. Jyothi climbed inside.

She stood near the window. Mahendra stood outside.

The bus started moving. She waved. He waved back.

She continued waving until the bus disappeared.

Mahendra stood there for several seconds.

Then he slowly lowered his hand. Parimala touched his shoulder.

“Come.”

He nodded. But he did not move immediately.

For the first time in eighteen years, the house would be quiet.

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6

Jyothi called every evening. Sometimes for five minutes. Sometimes for half an hour.

Sometimes only to say, “Appa, what did you eat?”

Mahendra would answer,

“Rice.”

“What curry?”

“Dal.”

“Same thing again?”

“Why? Are you sending biryani?”

“No.”

“Then don't ask.”

She laughed. Their conversations were simple. But they were precious.

She would tell him about her classes.

Her roommates….Her professors…..Her first presentation.

Her first failure….Her first friendship….Her first argument.

Her father listened to everything. He never rushed her.

Never said, “I am busy.”

Even when he was.

One evening, she called him crying.

“Appa.”

“What happened?”

“I don't think I can do this.”

“What?”

“Everything.”

“Tell me.”

“I don't understand some subjects. Everyone seems smarter than me. I feel like I don't belong here.”

Mahendra remained silent for a few seconds. He started to build up confidence in her.



He said, “Do you remember seventh standard?”

“Yes.”

“You came seventh in your class.”

She laughed through her tears.

“Why are you bringing that now?”

“Because you survived.”

She smiled.

“You always remember everything.”

“Of course.”

“Appa…”

“Yes?”

“What if I fail?”

“You'll learn.”

“What if I fail again?”

“You'll learn again.”

“What if I keep failing?”

“Then I'll still be here.”

There was silence. Jyothi wiped her tears.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being there.”

Mahendra looked toward the empty chair beside him.

“I told you I would walk with you.”

7

Four years passed quickly.

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Jyothi graduated. She got a job in Hyderabad.

Mahendra was proud. Very proud.

But he had also begun to notice something.

His daughter had become independent.

She was earning....Travelling.....

Making decisions.

Managing her life.....

She no longer needed to ask him about everything.

And that was exactly what he had wanted.

Still, there were moments when he missed being needed.

One Sunday morning, Jyothi came home unexpectedly.

Mahendra was watering plants.

“Appa!”

He turned.

For a second, he simply stared.

Then smiled.

“When did you come?”

“Just now.”

“You didn't tell me.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

He put down the hose.

“Did you eat?”

She laughed.

“That's your first question?”

“Of course.”

“I ate.”

“Properly?”

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e-magazine

“Yes.”

“Sure?”

“Yes!”

He nodded.

She walked toward him.

“Appa.”

“Hmmm?”

“I got a promotion.”

Mahendra's face brightened.

“Really?”

She nodded.

He hugged her and said, “I'm proud of you.”

She smiled. Then she noticed something.

“Appa, your hair has become white.”

He touched his head.

“Some of it.”

“Some?”

“Most of it.”

She laughed.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“What should I tell you?”

“That you're getting old.”

Mahendra smiled and said, “Everybody gets old.”

She looked at him carefully.

For the first time, she saw something she had not noticed before.

Her father was not as strong as he used to be.

His movements were slightly slower. His glasses were thicker.

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His hands had developed small veins.

And there was tiredness around his eyes.

She suddenly felt guilty.

She had been so busy growing up that she had not noticed him growing older.

8

A few months later, Mahendra began having difficulty with his knee.

It wasn't serious. But walking became painful.

He started avoiding stairs.

He stopped riding his scooter long distances.

Jyothi insisted he see a doctor.

“It's nothing.”

“Appa.”

“Just age.”

“Appa.”

“What?”

“You taught me never to ignore a problem.”

Mahendra smiled.

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“Then I suppose I must follow my own advice.”

She took leave from work and came home.

They went to the doctor.

The doctor prescribed treatment and some exercises.

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Nothing alarming. But Jyothi became more attentive.

She called every morning.

“Did you walk?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Enough.”

“How much?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Good.”

“Are you my daughter or my doctor?”

“Both.”

He laughed.

Their roles were slowly changing. He had once reminded her to study.

Now she reminded him to take his medicines. He had once packed her lunch.

Now she ordered groceries for him. He had once waited outside her classroom.

Now she waited for his doctor appointments. Life had quietly turned the circle.

9

One evening, Jyothi noticed her father sitting in his old wooden chair.

The same chair. The one she had known since childhood.

She sat beside him.

“Appa.”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you remember what you told me when I was eight?”

“What?”

“You said you'd walk with me for as long as I wanted.”

“I remember.”

“You are still walking with me.”

“Yes.”

“But now I think I should walk with you.”

Mahendra smiled.

“You already do.”

She rested her head on his shoulder and said, “Appa.”

“Yes?”

“Are you happy with me?”

He looked surprised.

“Why are you asking?”

“I don't know.”

He turned toward her.

“Listen to me.”

She looked at him.

“You don't make a father happy by becoming successful.”

“Then how?”

“By becoming a good human being.”

She was quiet.

“You are kind to people. You respect your mother. You don't forget where you came from. You help others.”

He smiled.

“That is enough.”

Jyothi's eyes filled with tears.

“I don't think I say thank you enough.”

Mahendra shook his head.

“Children don't have to thank their parents for loving them.”

“But still...”

He interrupted gently.

“Just live well.”

That was all he wanted.

10

Then came the day Jyothi told him she liked a guy and he also liked her. In fact he only proposed her.

She sat across from him.

“Appa.”

“Yes?”

“I want to tell you something.”

He looked at her face.

“You have someone?”

She nodded.

“Who?”

She told him.

Mahendra listened quietly.

“Does he respect you?”

“Yes.”

“Does he respect Amma?”

“Yes.”

“Does he know what you want from life?”

“Yes.”

“Does he support your work?”

“Yes.”

Mahendra nodded and said, “Then I want to meet him.”

The young man came the following week.

His name was Hemanth. He was polite.

Mahendra asked him questions. Not about salary. Not about property. Not about status.

Only about Jyothi.

“What does she do when she's angry?”

Hemanth smiled.

“She becomes very quiet.”

Mahendra smiled too.

“Correct.”

“What makes her happy?”

“Books.”

“Correct.”

“What scares her?”

Hemanth hesitated.

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e-magazine

“Losing people she loves.”

Mahendra became silent. That answer mattered.

He finally said,

“Take care of her.”

Hemanth nodded and said, “I will.”

Mahendra looked at his daughter. She was smiling. He smiled back.

11

The wedding preparations began.

The house that had once seemed too quiet after Jyothi left became noisy again.

Relatives came. Friends came. There were flowers everywhere. There was laughter.

There were arguments over decorations. There were endless cups of tea.

Mahendra was busy with arrangements.

But sometimes he would stop and simply watch his daughter.

She was no longer the little girl in two plaits. She was a grown woman.

Confident. Independent. Ready to begin a new life.

One evening, he found an old photograph.

Jyothi was about six years old. She was sitting on his scooter.

Her hands were around his waist. He stared at the picture for a long time.

Parimala came behind him.

“What are you looking at?”

“Our little girl.”

“She isn't little anymore.”

“I know.”

Parimala smiled.

“You are missing her already.”

“I haven't lost her.”

“I know.”

Mahendra looked at the photograph.

“Still…”

He couldn't finish.

Parimala placed her hand on his shoulder.

“She will always be your daughter.”

He nodded.

12

The wedding day arrived. Jyothi looked beautiful.

Mahendra could barely look at her without becoming emotional.

During the rituals, he tried to remain composed. He succeeded for most of the morning.

Then came the moment when she had to leave. She hugged her mother first.

Both cried.

Then she came to her father. Mahendra looked at her.

For a few seconds, neither spoke. Then she whispered,

“Appa.”

“Hmmm?”

“You're not going to cry, are you?”

He smiled.

“No.”

She hugged him.

He closed his eyes.

A tear rolled down his cheek.

He controlled himself.

He blessed his daughter.



Jyothi took the blessings from father.

She laughed softly through her tears.

“You lied.”

“I know.”

She held him tighter.

“Appa…”

“Yes?”

“Remember your promise.”

“What promise?”

“You said you'd walk with me.”

He nodded.

“I will.”

“Even now?”

“Especially now.”

She pulled away.

“Then walk with me.”

They walked together for a few steps. Then she turned toward her new life.

Mahendra stood still.

His daughter was leaving his house. But she wasn't leaving his heart.

13

The first year after the wedding was difficult for Mahendra.

Not because he disliked the change. He was happy that Jyothi was happy.

But the house had become quiet again. There was no one asking,

“Appa, where are my keys?”

No one stealing food from his plate. No one shouting from the bedroom,

“Appa, did you see my charger?”

No one calling him at midnight to discuss something unimportant.

He missed the unimportant things the most.

One Sunday, Jyothi called.

“Appa.”

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Why are you sounding sad?”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

“I am sitting in your mother's kitchen.”

“Why?”

“She is making tea.”

“Okay.”

“Your mother is angry with me.”

“Why?”

“I finished the biscuits.”

Jyothi laughed and said, “Appa!”

“Yes?”

“I'll come next weekend.”

“Don't come just because you think I'm lonely.”

“I am coming because I want to see you.”

Mahendra smiled.

“Good answer.”

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14

Years passed.

Jyothi and Hemanth had a daughter.

They named her Sitara.

The day Mahendra first held his granddaughter, he became emotional.

“She has your eyes,” he told Jyothi.

“No, Appa.”

“Yes.”

“She has your smile.”

Mahendra looked at the baby.

“My smile?”

“Yes.”

He held Sitara carefully.

Jyothi watched him. Something felt familiar.

The way he held the baby. The way he checked whether she was comfortable.

The way he worried when she made the smallest sound.

The way he smiled at her. It was the same father she remembered.

Only older. Much older.

Jyothi suddenly understood something.

A father's love does not become smaller when a daughter grows up.

It changes its shape. When she is small, he holds her hand.

When she grows, he gives her space. When she leaves, he waits.

When she returns, he doesn't ask how long she will stay. He simply becomes happy that she came.

15

One winter morning, Mahendra fell ill.

It wasn't sudden. His health had been slowly declining.

Jyothi started visiting more frequently. She began working remotely whenever possible. She spent evenings with him.

One evening, they sat together in the veranda. The same wooden chair.

The same street. But now the house around them looked older.

Jyothi brought him tea. He looked at the cup.

“You remember how I used to bring you milk?”

“Yes.”

“You used to refuse.”

“You always added too much sugar.”

“You liked sugar.”

“I was six.”

“You still do.”

She smiled.

“Appa.”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you remember the scooter?”

“Yes.”

“You promised to buy me one.”

“I did.”

“You never did.”

“You didn't ask.”

“I thought you would remember.”

“I remembered.”

“Then?”

“I was waiting for you to earn and buy one for me.”

She laughed.

“Still waiting?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.”

She leaned against his shoulder.

“I'll buy you one.”

He smiled.

“Now I don't need one.”

“Why?”

“Because you are here.”

She became silent.

16

A few weeks later, Mahendra's condition became worse.

Jyothi stayed beside him.

One night, he woke up.

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“Jyothi.”

She immediately sat up.

“Yes, Appa?”

“Are you there?”

“Yes.”

“Don't go.”

“I won't.”

He closed his eyes.

“Good.”

After a few moments, he said,

“Do you remember your first day of school?”

“Yes.”

“You were crying.”

“I was not.”

“You were.”

“I wasn't.”

“You held my finger so tightly.”

She smiled.

“I was scared.”

“I know.”

“You told me you would wait outside.”

“I did.”

“Even when school ended?”

“Of course.”

She looked at him.

“Appa.”

“Yes?”

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“You waited outside my school for years.”

He smiled faintly.

“I wanted to make sure you came out safely.”

She held his hand.

“Now I will wait outside for you.”

He looked at her.

“What do you mean?”

“Wherever you are going.”

He squeezed her hand.

“I know.”

17

The next morning, Mahendra was peaceful.

His family was around him. Parimala sat beside him. Jyothi held his hand. He looked at his daughter.

There was no fear in his eyes. Only peace.

“Jyothi.”

“Yes, Appa?”

“Be happy.”

“I will.”

“Don't worry about me.”

“I won't.”

“Take care of Amma.”

“I will.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

He smiled.

Then he looked toward the veranda. His old chair was visible through the open door.

“Keep that chair.”

Jyothi began crying.

“I will.”

“Don't throw it away.”

“I won't.”

“It has many memories.”

She nodded.

“Yes.”

He closed his eyes. Jyothi held his hand.

And for the first time in her life, she did not know what to say to her father.

So she said the simplest thing.

“Appa, I am here.”

His fingers moved slightly inside hers……Then became still.

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18

After the funeral, the house felt different.

Not empty….Different.

Every corner contained him. His spectacles were still near the newspaper.

His slippers were near the door. His old watch was on the table.

The wooden chair remained in the veranda.

Jyothi stood before it. She touched it. It was just a chair.

But to her, it was her childhood. She remembered sitting on his lap there.

Doing homework there. Listening to stories there.

Crying there. Laughing there. Talking about college there.

Talking about marriage there. Holding her daughter there.

She sat down. For a moment, she closed her eyes. She could almost hear his voice.

“Did you eat?”

She smiled through her tears.

“Yes, Appa.”

Silence.

Then she whispered,

“I miss you.”

19

Months passed. Life continued.

It always does. Jyothi returned to work.

Sitara grew. Parimala slowly adjusted to the quietness.

But every Sunday, Jyothi came home.

She would sit in the old wooden chair. Sometimes with tea. Sometimes with Sitara.

One Sunday, Sitara climbed onto her lap.

“Amma.”

“Yes?”

“Whose chair is this?”

Jyothi looked at it. She smiled.

“This was your grandfather's chair.”

“Where is grandfather?”

Jyothi looked toward the sky.

“He is somewhere we cannot see.”

“Can he see us?”

Jyothi thought for a moment.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Because love can see even when eyes cannot.”

Sitara smiled.

“Did grandfather love you?”

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Jyothi's eyes filled with tears.

“Very much.”

“How much?”

Jyothi looked around the house.

“As much as the sky.”

Sitara looked outside.

“That much?”

Jyothi nodded.

“Maybe more.”

Sitara hugged her. Jyothi held her tightly.

And suddenly she understood something her father had taught her without ever explaining it.

Love does not disappear when someone leaves. It becomes memory. Memory becomes strength.

Strength becomes the way we live. And sometimes, it becomes the way we love our own children.

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20

Years later, Jyothi became a mother of two.

Her children grew up hearing stories about their grandfather.

They knew about the old scooter. They knew about the wooden chair.

They knew about the school uniform. They knew about the expensive shoes.

They knew about the five-minute phone calls that lasted an hour.

They knew their grandfather had once told their mother:

“Your feet should be comfortable when you walk towards your dreams.”

One evening, Jyothi took her son and daughter to the old street where she had grown up.

The house looked smaller now. The road looked narrower.

The trees looked taller. Her son asked,

“Amma, is this where you lived?”

“Yes.”

“And this is where grandfather used to take you to school?”

“Yes.”

“On the old scooter?”

She smiled.

“Yes.”

Her daughter took her hand.

“Amma, did you love grandfather very much?”

Jyothi stopped walking. She looked at the house. Then she looked at her children.

“Yes.”

“More than us?”

Jyothi laughed.

“Love doesn't work like that.”

“Then how?”

She knelt before them.

“Your grandfather taught me something.”

“What?”

“That love is not measured by how much time you spend with someone.”

She paused.

“It is measured by how much of them remains inside you.”

The children listened.

“He taught me courage.”

“He taught me kindness.”

“He taught me to stand again when I fall.”

“He taught me that success is not about becoming better than others.”

“And most importantly…”

She smiled.

“He taught me that when you truly love someone, you don't hold them back. You teach them to fly.”

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Her daughter looked toward the house.

“Did grandfather teach you to fly?”

Jyothi nodded.

“Yes.”

“Then who taught him?”

Jyothi smiled.

“I don't know.”

She looked at the sky.

“Maybe his parents.”

“Who taught them?”

Jyothi laughed.

“You have too many questions.”

Her son grinned.

“Like you?”

She looked at him.

“Yes.”

And for a moment, she could almost hear her father's laughter.

21

That evening, Jyothi returned home.

She opened the old wooden trunk that had belonged to her father.

Inside were photographs...Receipts.

Old letters. A broken watch. Her school badge...And one small photograph. She picked it up.

It was the photograph of her sitting on her father's scooter when she was six.

Her arms were wrapped around his waist. Her father was smiling.

She turned the photograph over. There was something written on the back in his handwriting.

She had never noticed it before. Only one sentence.

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“One day she will walk ahead of me. I only hope she remembers that I was always walking behind her.”

Jyothi pressed the photograph against her heart.

She cried. Not because she was sad. Because she finally understood.

All those years, she had thought her father was walking beside her.

But he had often been walking behind her.

Watching…..Protecting…..Waiting.

Giving her freedom….Letting her make mistakes.

Letting her become herself. He had never tried to own her life.

He had simply wanted to make sure she had the courage to live it.

She explained her children how much great father was who was always there beside her.



22

The following morning, Jyothi took the old wooden chair outside.

She cleaned it carefully. Then she placed it under the same tree where her father used to sit.

Her daughter came running.

“Amma!”

“Yes?”

“Can I sit there?”

Jyothi smiled.

“Of course.”

The little girl climbed onto the chair.

Jyothi stood behind her. For a second, something felt strangely familiar.

A little girl. A wooden chair. A parent's hand resting gently on her shoulder.

The same love. A different generation.

Her daughter looked up.

“Amma, will you always be with me?”

Jyothi froze.

The question took her back thirty years. To a little girl. A scooter. A traffic signal.

And a father who had smiled and said,

“For as long as you want me to.”

Jyothi knelt beside her daughter. She held her hand.

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

Jyothi smiled.

“For as long as you want me to.”

Her daughter hugged her. Jyothi closed her eyes.

And somewhere deep inside her heart, she felt that her father was smiling.

Because the promise he had once made to her had not ended. It had simply passed from one

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generation to another.

23

That night, Jyothi sat alone in the veranda.

The old chair was beside her. She looked at the stars.

“Appa…”

There was no answer. But she smiled anyway.

“I'm doing okay.”

The night remained silent.

“I take care of Amma.”

Silence.

“I take care of your grandchildren.”

Silence.

“I still remember everything.”

A gentle breeze moved through the tree. Jyothi looked up.

And for the first time, she did not feel that her father was gone.

She understood that he had simply changed his place.

He was no longer sitting in the wooden chair. He was in her voice when she spoke to her children.

He was in her patience. He was in her courage. He was in the way she held her daughter's hand. He was in every difficult decision she made.

He was in every kindness she offered. He was in every dream she encouraged. He was in every time she told her children,

“You can do it.”

He had become a part of the person she was.

And perhaps that was the greatest gift a father could leave his daughter.

Not money. Not property. Not possessions. But a way of living.

A way of loving. A way of standing tall. A way of walking forward.**The Place Beside Father.**

Many years ago, a little girl had asked her father,

“Will you always walk with me?”

He had said yes.

He kept that promise for as long as he could. But life eventually made him stop walking.

The daughter continued. She built her career.

She built her family. She became a mother. She became stronger. She became independent.

And yet, whenever life became difficult, she could still feel that little girl's hand inside her own.

Because fathers do something extraordinary.

They spend their entire lives preparing their daughters to live without them.

And when the day finally comes, they leave behind enough love to make sure she never truly feels alone.

A father may not always say, “I am proud of you.”

He may not always say, “I am worried about you.”

He may not even say, “I love you.”

Sometimes he simply wakes up early.

Takes you to school.....Waits outside.....Buys the shoes you need.....Pays the fees you cannot see.

Listens to your fears.....Hides his own.

Stands behind your decisions. Lets you leave.

And waits for you to come home. That is how some fathers love.

Quietly.....Without asking for anything in return.

And one day, when the daughter finally understands it all, she realizes something beautiful.

She was never walking alone. There had always been a place beside him for her.

And even after he was gone, there was still a place beside her for him.

Because a daughter may grow out of her father's home, but she never grows out of her father's heart.

****

Comments can be sent to : info@bookwave.net


The
Sound
She Chose
www.bookwave.net

Priyanka had always been a little different.

Not in the way people noticed immediately.

She was a quiet child, affectionate with her parents, respectful with elders, and ordinary in almost every way. She went to school, completed her homework, played with her friends, and came home before it became dark.

But somewhere inside her was a small world that belonged entirely to her.

Her parents discovered that world when Priyanka was eight years old.

They wanted her to learn music.

They believed music would bring discipline into her life, make her more confident, and perhaps give her something beautiful to carry with her as she grew older.

So one evening, her father took her to a music teacher.

"Learn properly," he told her lovingly. "You may not understand its value now. One day you will thank us."

Priyanka nodded.

She began learning.

For a few weeks, she tried sincerely.

She attended her classes, practiced what she was taught, and sat patiently through the lessons.

But something was missing.

She did not feel excited.

She did not look forward to the next class.

Music was there, but her heart was not.

Her parents noticed it.

"Why are you not practicing?" her mother asked one evening.

"I am practicing, Amma," Priyanka replied.

"Then why do you look so unhappy?"

Priyanka did not have an answer.

She herself did not understand why.

Then, one afternoon, something happened. Something that changed everything.

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Priyanka had gone with her father to a cultural program in their town.

She was sitting quietly among the audience when the musicians came onto the stage.

There were several instruments.

A keyboard.

A guitar.

A flute.

And then, one musician walked forward carrying an instrument Priyanka had never seen so closely before.

It shone under the stage lights. The musician lifted it to his lips.

And then came the sound. It was deep.

It was powerful. It was gentle at the same time.

The sound seemed to travel directly into Priyanka's heart.

She forgot the people sitting around her.

She forgot the program. She forgot everything.

She watched only the musician.

"What is that?" she whispered.

Her father looked at the stage.

"Saxophone."

"Saxophone..." Priyanka repeated.

She said the word slowly, as if she had discovered something precious.

That evening, on the way home, she asked her father,

"Nanna, can I learn saxophone?"

Her father laughed.

"Saxophone?"

"Yes."

"You?"

"Yes."

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"Why saxophone?"

"I like the sound."

Her father smiled.

"Learn guitar. It will be easier."

"No."

"Then flute?"

"No."

"Keyboard?"

"No, Nanna."

Her father looked at her through the rear-view mirror.

"What do you want?"

"Saxophone."

He laughed again.

But Priyanka did not.

She had already made her choice. Her parents did not understand.

They had imagined their daughter learning a more familiar instrument.

Something they could easily understand. Something they could explain to relatives.

"Priyanka is learning keyboard."

"Priyanka is learning guitar."

"Priyanka is learning flute."

These were familiar sentences.

But saxophone?

That was different. And there was another reason.

Her parents rarely saw girls learning or performing saxophone.

They were worried.

"Why do you want to choose something so unusual?" her mother asked.

"Because I like it."

"You may like it today and stop tomorrow."

"I won't."

"You don't even enjoy your present music classes."

"Because I don't like that instrument."

Her mother sighed.

"Music is music, Priyanka."

"No, Amma," she replied gently. "For me, the instrument matters."

Her parents tried to convince her. They showed her pictures of guitar players.

They spoke about keyboard classes. They suggested flute.

Priyanka listened respectfully.

But every time they asked what she wanted, her answer remained the same.

"Saxophone."

The discussion continued for months.

Sometimes her parents became frustrated. Sometimes Priyanka became silent.

There were even days when she wondered whether she should give up.

But whenever she heard the sound of a saxophone somewhere, that feeling returned.

The feeling that told her:

This is what I want.

One evening, Priyanka sat beside her mother.

"Amma..."

"What?"

"Please let me try."

"You already tried music."

"Not this."

Her mother looked at her.

"I don't want to disappoint you," Priyanka continued. "I don't want to learn something just because everyone thinks it is better for me. I want to learn something I truly love."

Her mother remained silent.

Priyanka continued.

"If I fail, I will accept it. If I don't become a good musician, I will accept that too. But please give me one chance."

Her mother looked at her daughter's eyes.

There was no stubbornness in them.

There was determination.

A few days later, her parents finally agreed.

"All right," her father said. "Learn saxophone."

Priyanka could hardly believe what she had heard.

It was very encouraging moment to a little girl.

Her father took her to music instruments shop and purchased the saxophone for her.



The moment she got the saxophone, tears rolled from her eyes.

Her dad wiped her tears and said, “Dreams should be there to achieve”.

She assured him, “ Surely I will achieve daddy”

He again said, “ Remember one thing”

"What?"

"If you choose it, don't give it up halfway."

Priyanka smiled.

"I won't."

And she didn't.

The first few months were difficult.

Saxophone was not easy. The instrument felt heavy in her hands.

Her breathing was not right. Her fingers struggled to move correctly.

Sometimes the sound that came from the instrument was nothing like the beautiful music she had imagined.

It squeaked. It cracked.....Sometimes it sounded terrible.

Her father would look toward her room and smile. Her mother would cover her ears playfully.

"Are you sure this is music?" she would tease.

Priyanka would laugh.

"One day, Amma. You will like it."

"Let's see."

And then she would practice again.

And again.....And again.

She learned breathing. She learned fingering. She learned scales.

She learned how to control the instrument. Most importantly, she learned patience.

There were days when she was tired. There were days when her fingers hurt.

There were days when she wondered whether she had chosen something too difficult.

But she remembered her father's words.

If you choose it, don't give it up halfway.

So she continued. One year passed. Then another.

Priyanka was no longer the little girl who had first fallen in love with the sound of the saxophone.

She was becoming a musician.

As the years passed, her relationship with the instrument became deeper.

She could now make the saxophone speak.

She could make it sing...

She could make it whisper.

She could make it cry....

She could make it celebrate.

People began noticing her talent. Her teachers praised her.

Musicians invited her to perform.

Her first stage performance was a small one.

Her hands trembled before she went on stage.

Her father noticed.

"Nervous?"

"A little."

"Then look at us."

She looked at her parents sitting in the audience.

Her father smiled.

Her mother raised her hand encouragingly.

Priyanka walked onto the stage.

She lifted the saxophone.

For a moment, the hall became silent. Then she began. The first note came out softly.

Then another....

Within moments, the nervousness disappeared.

There was only Priyanka and her instrument.

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When she finished, the hall erupted in applause.

She looked toward her parents.

Her mother's eyes were shining.

Her father was clapping proudly.

That applause meant more to Priyanka than anything else.

It was the first time she understood that her choice had a future.

Years passed.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Priyanka kept learning.

She never stopped improving.

She attended performances....She learned from experienced musicians.

She practiced for hours....She became known for her saxophone performances.

And because there were relatively few women performing saxophone on major stages around her, people began taking special notice of her.

Invitations came.

Concerts came.

Cultural festivals came.

She performed with musical groups in different cities. Her name slowly began appearing on programs.

Her parents watched everything from a distance. Sometimes her mother would proudly show her daughter's photographs to relatives.

"That's my daughter."

Her father rarely said much.

But whenever someone praised Priyanka, he would smile.

Inside him lived a memory. A little girl saying,

"Nanna, I want to learn saxophone."

And he remembered how uncertain he had been. Now he was beginning to understand.

Perhaps children don't always know the entire road.

But sometimes they know which direction their heart wants to walk.

Almost ten years had passed since that evening when Priyanka had first asked for permission.

By then, she had become an accomplished saxophone artist.

And then came an opportunity none of them had expected.

Her musical group was invited to perform abroad.

In London.

When Priyanka received the news, she stared at the message for several seconds.

"London..."

She whispered the word. Then she ran to her parents.

"Nanna!"

"What happened?"

"We are going to London!"

Her mother looked confused.

"For what?"

"Concert!"

There was silence. Her father looked at her.

"London?"

Priyanka nodded. Her smile was enormous.

Her mother hugged her. Her father placed his hand on her head.

"Very proud of you."

All were very happy.

Year of hard work fetched results to Priyanka.

That moment was precious to her.

She lived upto the expectations of her parents who kept confidence on her.



After some time, Priyanka suddenly became quiet.

She looked at both of them.

"You're coming."

Her father laughed.

"What?"

"Both of you."

"Why?"

"Because I want you there."

"We will see the photographs."

"No."

She shook her head.

"I want you to sit in the audience."

Her mother smiled.

"Priyanka..."

"I want you to see me perform on london stages."

Her father looked at his wife.

There was a long silence.

Then he smiled.

"All right."

For Priyanka, the journey to London was not simply an international trip.

It was the completion of a circle.

Ten years earlier, her parents had wondered whether saxophone was the right choice.

They had worried that she might lose interest.

They had suggested other instruments.

They had questioned her decision.

And now, ten years later, they were flying across the world because of that very instrument.

When the aircraft began to descend toward London, Priyanka looked through the window.

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The city appeared beneath her. She looked at her parents.

Her mother was looking outside with wonder.

Her father was sitting quietly, taking everything in.

Priyanka smiled.

A thought came into her heart.

I brought them here.

Not because she had become rich. Not because she had planned it for years.

But because she had followed something she genuinely loved.

Her saxophone had taken her farther than she had ever imagined.

And now it had carried her parents with her.

The evening of the concert arrived.

The hall was filled. Lights illuminated the stage.

Musicians prepared their instruments.

The audience waited.

Priyanka stood backstage holding her saxophone.

Her heart was beating fast. Not because it was her first concert.

It wasn't.

She had performed many times. But this was different.

Tonight, her parents were sitting in the audience.

She looked toward them. Her father caught her eye.

He gave her the same smile he had given her before her very first performance years ago.

Her mother joined her palms and silently wished her well.

Priyanka closed her eyes for a moment. She remembered everything.

The first music class she didn't enjoy. The first time she heard a saxophone.

The arguments at home. The months of waiting for permission.

The difficult practice sessions. The painful notes.

The first stage. The applause.

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The years of learning. The invitations.

The recognition. And finally…

London.

The announcer called her name. Priyanka walked onto the stage.

She lifted the saxophone.

And began to play.

The first notes floated through the hall.

Then the music grew.

It filled the room.

There was confidence in every breath.

Years of discipline were hidden inside every note.

Years of determination lived in every movement of her fingers.



Her parents watched without taking their eyes away.

Her mother quietly wiped a tear.

Her father sat completely still.

He was remembering the day he had once asked his daughter,

"Why saxophone?"

He finally had his answer.

Because it was hers. Because she had loved it.

Because she had stayed with it. Because she had worked for it.

And because she had turned a childhood wish into something extraordinary.

When the final note ended, the audience stood and applauded.

Priyanka looked toward her parents. She couldn't stop smiling.

Her father stood. Her mother stood beside him.

And they applauded louder than anyone else.

After the concert, Priyanka ran toward them.

Her mother hugged her tightly.

"You did it."

Priyanka laughed through her tears.

"We did it, Amma."

Her father looked at her.

"No."

He paused.

"You did it."

Priyanka shook her head.

"If you hadn't allowed me to learn saxophone..."

Her father interrupted.

"We almost didn't."

They all laughed.

Her mother said,

"Do you remember how many times we told you to learn keyboard?"

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"Yes."

"And flute?"

"Yes."

"Guitar?"

Priyanka laughed.

"Yes, Amma."

Her father smiled.

"We were afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"That you were choosing something difficult."

Priyanka looked at him.

"And now?"

He looked at the saxophone in her hand.

"Now I know that sometimes the difficult road is the road that belongs to us."

Priyanka's eyes filled with tears. She leaned against her father's shoulder.

Her mother held her hand. For a few moments, none of them spoke.

They simply stood there together in a foreign country, after a concert that had begun with a little girl's stubborn dream.

That night, Priyanka stood outside the hotel and looked at the London sky.

Her parents were beside her. She held her saxophone case in one hand.

Her father looked at her and smiled.

"You wanted to learn this instrument."

"Yes."

"You fought for it."

"Yes."

"You practiced for ten years."

"Yes."

"And today..."

He looked around at the city and said, "You brought us to London."

Priyanka smiled.

"Not just London, Nanna."

He looked at her.

"You both came here with me."

She paused for some time and said, "This is my happiest concert."

Her mother asked,

"Because of the audience?"

Priyanka shook her head.

"No."

"Because of the applause?"

Again, she shook her head.

"Then why?"

Priyanka looked at both of them.

"Because when I looked at you from the stage, I felt that all those years of practice were worth it."

Her parents said nothing.

They simply stood beside their daughter.

The little girl who had once wanted only one thing had grown into a woman who could take her parents across the world with the sound of her own music.

Years ago, her parents had thought they were giving their daughter permission to learn an instrument.

They did not know they were giving her permission to discover herself.

They had once worried that saxophone might be a passing fascination.

They had feared she might regret her choice. But Priyanka had taught them something beautiful.

A child may not always choose the easiest path.

Sometimes the right path is the one that makes the child's heart come alive.

Priyanka had not simply learned to play the saxophone.

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She had learned to believe in herself. She had learned that talent needs patience.

That dreams need discipline. That unusual choices need courage.

And above all, she had learned that when parents finally trust the dream living inside their child, something beautiful can happen.

That night in London, Priyanka looked at her parents once again.

The three of them walked slowly through the city.

Her saxophone was beside her. Her parents were beside her.And in her heart was a quiet happiness.

She had dreamed of becoming a great saxophone artist. She had achieved that dream.

But another dream had quietly come true along the way.

She had taken the two people who had once worried about her choice...

and brought them all the way to London to hear the sound of the dream they had once been afraid to believe in.

For Priyanka, that was the most beautiful music of all.

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Comments can be sent to : kumar.ravichn2010@gmail.com


BookWave
Stories that touch hearts
Take the First Step
No Silence Please…
Do not hesitate to take initiative
to improve bonds and relationships…
A NOVEL

Sometimes, one step is all it takes to bring a relationship back to life.

Chapter 1 — The Girl Who Stopped Expecting

There are some silences that last for a few minutes.

Some last for a few days.

And then there are silences that quietly become a part of a person's life.

They settle into the walls of a house. They sit across the dining table. They travel along with a child to school, sit beside her during examinations, follow her into adulthood, and sometimes even become part of the way she thinks.

Vaasanthi grew up with one such silence.

She was twelve when she first understood that something was different about her family.

Until then, she had believed that every house had a mother and father who lived together, spoke to each other, argued sometimes, laughed sometimes, and sat together at the end of the day.

Her house had a mother. Her house had a father.

But they did not live together. And nobody explained why.

Her mother, Radha, never liked discussing the subject.

Whenever Vaasanthi asked about her father, Radha would find something else to talk about.

“Have you finished your homework?”

“Go and eat first.”

“You have school tomorrow.”

“Don't think about unnecessary things.”

The answers changed. The silence never did.

Vaasanthi slowly learned not to ask.

Her father, Kishan, lived in another part of the city. She knew that much. She also knew that he sometimes tried to contact them.

There were occasions when he came near their house.

Once, when Vaasanthi was thirteen, she saw him standing across the road. She had been returning from school.

She recognized him immediately. He was standing beneath a large rain tree, holding an umbrella.



Their eyes met. For a moment, neither of them moved.

Vaasanthi's heart began beating faster. She wanted to run towards him.

She wanted to ask him why he had gone away. She wanted to ask him whether he had missed her.

She wanted to know whether he had ever thought about her birthday.

She wanted to know whether he still remembered the small things she used to do when she was a child.

But before she could take even one step, Radha appeared at the doorway.

“Vaasanthi.”

The girl's feet stopped.

Radha looked at Kishan and Kishan looked at Radha.

Neither spoke. After a few seconds, Kishan lowered his eyes. He turned around and walked away.

Vaasanthi watched him disappear into the traffic.

That evening she asked her mother, “Why didn't you allow me to speak to him?”

Radha remained silent.

“Amma...”

“Please don't ask me again.”

“But he is my father.”

Radha's face tightened and she said, “He is not part of our life anymore.”

That sentence stayed with Vaasanthi. Not because she understood it. Because she didn't.

Years passed.

Kishan tried several times. Sometimes he called. Sometimes he sent messages.

Sometimes he came personally. Sometimes he asked people known to both of them to speak to Radha.

But Radha never changed her decision. And every time Kishan tried, Vaasanthi was told only one thing:

“Don't get involved.”

So she didn't. At least, she tried not to.

But children cannot simply switch off their feelings because adults tell them to.

Vaasanthi still wondered.

She wondered what had happened between her parents.

She wondered whether her father had done something terrible.

She wondered whether her mother was protecting her.

She wondered whether she was supposed to hate him.

Most of all, she wondered why nobody was willing to tell her the truth.

Eventually, she stopped asking. That was the beginning of another change.

She began becoming quiet.

Not shy. Not weak.

Quiet.

There was a difference.

She spoke when necessary. She studied seriously.

She completed her work. She did not expect anyone to understand her.

She did not expect anyone to stay. And, slowly, she stopped expecting affection.

At school, when other girls spoke excitedly about their fathers, Vaasanthi listened without participating.

One girl would say, “My father is taking me to the exhibition tomorrow.”

Another would say, “My father bought me a new bicycle.”

Someone else would complain, “My father is so strict.”

Vaasanthi would smile.

She never told them that she would have given almost anything to hear her father complain about her homework.

She never told them that even a small argument with him would have felt precious.

She had something that many children had. A father.

But she did not have his presence. And that difference slowly shaped her.

By the time Vaasanthi entered college, she had become extremely practical.

She had decided something very firmly. **Never become dependent on emotions.**

Emotions, she believed, made people weak. Relationships created expectations.

Expectations created disappointment. Disappointment created pain.

Therefore, the safest way to live was simple.

Do your work..Earn your money.. Stand on your own feet.

Do not expect anyone. Do not depend on anyone.

And above all—

never allow anyone to become so important that losing them can break you.

It was a philosophy she had not learned from a book. Life had taught it to her.

She chose Mass Communication and Journalism.

When she told some relatives about her decision, the reactions were predictable.

“Journalism?”

“Why do you want to go into that field?”

“There is no stability.”

“Why don't you study something safer?”

“Who will marry a girl who is always running around with a camera crew?”

Vaasanthi listened. She did not argue.

She simply continued studying. Her mother was not particularly enthusiastic either.

But Radha knew her daughter well enough to understand that once Vaasanthi decided something, it was difficult to change her mind.

So she let her go.

Vaasanthi worked harder than most of her classmates. She read newspapers every morning.

She followed national and international news. She watched interviews carefully.

She observed how experienced journalists asked questions.

She noticed their pauses. Their expressions. Their tone.

The way they listened. The way they asked one question based on the answer to another.

She became fascinated by journalism. For her, journalism was not merely about reporting an incident.

It was about finding the story behind the incident. Behind every accident was a family.

Behind every achievement was a struggle. Behind every award was years of failure.

Behind every smiling face was a life that nobody knew.

She didn't know it yet, but this understanding would eventually change her own life.

After completing her course, Vaasanthi began searching for a job.

The search was not easy. One interview after another ended without an offer.

Sometimes she was told she lacked experience. Sometimes she was told she needed better presentation skills.

Sometimes they simply preferred another candidate. She returned home many evenings tired and disappointed.

But she never cried. She had trained herself not to.

One evening Radha asked, “Didn't you get the job?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“They said they wanted someone with experience.”

Radha looked at her daughter and asked, “Are you upset?”

Vaasanthi picked up her glass of water and said, “No.”

Radha smiled faintly.

“You can tell me if you are.”

“I am not.”

But she was. Deep inside, she was frightened.

She wondered whether all those people who had discouraged her were right.

Maybe journalism was not meant for her. Maybe she had chosen the wrong profession.

Maybe dreams were luxuries meant for people who could afford to fail. She went to bed that night with hundreds of thoughts.

The next morning, she woke up and started again. That became her habit.

Fail….Think….Learn….Try again….Never stop.

A few months later, her phone rang.

It was a news channel. They wanted to interview her.

Vaasanthi sat upright.

“Sir?”

“Yes. We saw your application.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can you come tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ten o'clock.”

“I'll be there.”

She disconnected the call.

For several seconds she simply stared at the phone. Then she smiled.

It was one of the rare smiles that came without effort.

The next morning, she went for the interview. She was selected.

It was not the position she had imagined. She was not immediately sent to cover major political stories or national events.

She was assigned to local reporting.

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Traffic…Weather…..Road conditions…..Local civic problems….

Small public events…..Community developments…..Accidents…..

Municipal announcements….and Anything happening within her allotted area.



Her cameraman was named Ravi. He was experienced, calm and considerably more relaxed than Vaasanthi.

On their first assignment together, Ravi looked at her and said,

“Don't worry.”

“I'm not worried.”

“You look worried.”

“I am not.”

Ravi laughed and said, “Good. Then you won't mind if I tell you something.”

“What?”

“Your first live report will probably go wrong.”

Vaasanthi stared at him.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because everyone's first live report goes wrong.”

She almost smiled and said, “And if mine doesn't?”

“Then I'll be worried about you.”

That was the beginning of their professional partnership.

Her first live report was about traffic congestion caused by road repairs.

She stood beside the road. Cars moved behind her. Buses honked. People walked past.

Ravi adjusted the camera. The producer's voice came through her earpiece.

“Vaasanthi, you're live in five…”

Her heart began racing.

“Four…”

She took a breath.

“Three…”

She looked straight into the camera.

“Two…”

For one brief second, she thought of all the people who had told her journalism was not a suitable career.

“One…”

She began.

“Good morning. This is Vaasanthi reporting from…”

Her voice was steady. Her words were clear.

She completed the report.

When the camera stopped, Ravi lowered it.

He smiled.

“Not bad.”

Vaasanthi looked at him.

“Only not bad?”

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“For the first time?”

He nodded.

“Very good.”

She smiled. It was a small moment. But it mattered.

For the first time in her life, Vaasanthi felt that she had built something entirely on her own.

She had entered a profession people had discouraged her from choosing.

And she was beginning to succeed. She did not need anyone's affection.

She did not need anyone's approval. She had her work. That was enough.

Or at least, she thought it was.

She did not know that within a few months, her profession would begin introducing her to people who would quietly dismantle everything she believed about human emotions.

And she certainly did not know that one of those lessons would eventually lead her back to the man she had spent fifteen years trying not to miss.

Her father.

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Chapter 2:

Vaasanthi soon discovered that television journalism was very different from what she had imagined while sitting in a college classroom.

In college, journalism had been about news. In the real world, it was about people.

And people were never as simple as a headline. A road accident was not merely an accident.

It was a father who had left home that morning without knowing that he would never return.

A traffic jam was not merely a traffic jam. It was hundreds of people waiting impatiently, each carrying a different story, a different destination and a different reason for wanting to reach home.

A hospital announcement was not merely an announcement. It could mean hope for one family and fear for another.

Vaasanthi began to understand this slowly.

Her work started early. Some mornings she would leave home before sunrise.

Other days she would return after everyone in the neighbourhood had gone to sleep.

She became familiar with roads, hospitals, police stations, municipal offices and crowded marketplaces.

Ravi became her constant professional companion. He carried the camera. She carried the microphone.

Together they moved from one assignment to another.

“Traffic update near the flyover,” the producer would say.

They would go.

“Water supply problem in the eastern area.”

They would go.

“Local school annual day.”

They would go.

“Fire accident at a warehouse.”

They would go.

“Rainwater entering houses in the low-lying areas.”

They would go.

Vaasanthi never complained. She liked the unpredictability.

Every day was different. Every assignment took her somewhere she had never been.

And every place introduced her to people she would never otherwise have met.

Yet there was one thing she did not allow herself to do.

Become attached.

If she met a family affected by an accident, she reported the story and left.

If an elderly man told her about his struggle to get medical treatment, she listened, reported and moved on.

If a child spoke about losing a parent, she maintained her professional composure.

She had trained herself to keep a wall between the story and herself.

Ravi noticed it.

One evening, after they finished reporting about a fire that had destroyed several small shops, they sat inside the news van.

The road outside was still crowded. Vaasanthi was checking her notes.

Ravi looked at her and said, “You never get emotional?”

She looked up.

“About what?”

“Today's story.”

“What about it?”

“The shop owners lost everything.”

“Yes.”

“Some of them were crying.”

“I saw.”

“You didn't feel anything?”

Vaasanthi closed her notebook.

“I felt sorry for them.”

“That's all?”

“What else should I do?”

Ravi shrugged.

“I don't know.”

Vaasanthi looked through the window.

“If I start carrying every person's pain home, I won't be able to do my job.”

Ravi thought about It and said, “That makes sense.”

She smiled slightly.

“I know.”

But there was something she did not tell him.

It wasn't merely professional discipline. She was afraid of feeling too much.

Because she knew what happened when feelings became important.

They created expectations. And expectations could be broken.

She had experienced that once already. She had no intention of experiencing it again.

At home, life remained quiet.

Radha had become accustomed to her daughter's unusual working hours. Some days Vaasanthi ate dinner at ten. Some days at eleven.

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Sometimes she returned home after midnight. Radha would wait.

“You could have slept,” Vaasanthi would say.

“I wasn't sleepy.”

“You always say that.”

Radha would smile.

“Go and eat.”

Their relationship was close in its own quiet way. Radha had raised her alone. She had worked hard. She had made sacrifices.

She had protected her daughter from many things she believed would hurt her. Vaasanthi knew that.

She never questioned her mother's intentions. If anything, she felt grateful to her.

But there was one subject they never discussed. Kishan....her father... His name rarely entered their home.

It was almost as though the name itself carried a weight that neither mother nor daughter wanted to lift.

Yet Kishan had never completely disappeared. Every few months, something would remind Vaasanthi of him.

A message.

A phone call.

A person from the past.

A festival.

A birthday.

A photograph....And occasionally, a missed call on Radha's phone.

Radha would see it. She would put the phone down. And life would continue.

One Sunday afternoon, Vaasanthi was cleaning an old cupboard.

She had been looking for a file when she found a small box.

It was covered with dust. She opened it. Inside were old photographs.

School photographs....Family photographs.....A few greeting cards.....Some old letters.

She began looking through them....Then she found one photograph that made her stop.

It was taken when she was perhaps five years old. She was sitting on Kishan's shoulders.

He was smiling and She was laughing. She stared at the photograph for a long time.

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She could barely remember that day. But something about the photograph felt familiar.

The way his hand held her leg.The way she was holding his hair. The way he was looking at her.

There was happiness in that photograph. Real happiness.

Vaasanthi turned the photograph over. There was a date written on the back.

She calculated.That was before her parents separated. She looked at the photograph again.

For the first time in many years, she wondered:

What happened between them?

She put the photograph back. Then she took it out again.

She looked at it once more. Finally, she placed it in the box and closed the lid.

She didn't ask Radha. She didn't call Kishan. She didn't investigate.

She simply returned the box to the cupboard.That was how Vaasanthi had learned to deal with difficult questions.

If there was no answer available— don't ask.

Her career, however, was moving forward. Her reports became sharper.

Her voice became more confident. Her ability to speak spontaneously improved.

The producers began trusting her. Sometimes they would send her to cover a story at short notice.

Sometimes she would be asked to speak live for several minutes without preparation.

She handled it.

One morning, after a particularly difficult live report, the news editor called her into his cabin. Vaasanthi stood before his desk.

“Yes, sir?”

He looked at the screen.

“Your report from yesterday was good.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You handled the questions well.”

“Thank you.”

He leaned back.

“We have been watching your work.”

Vaasanthi waited.

“You communicate well.”

She nodded.

“We are thinking of giving you more interviews.”

She was surprised.

“Interviews?”

“Yes.”

“With whom?”

“People from different fields.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“I'd be happy to.”

“Don't be too happy yet.”

She laughed. The editor continued.

“You'll have to prepare very well. These won't be ordinary interviews.”

“I will.”

“Doctors. Artists. Writers. Sports personalities. Social workers. Musicians. Public figures.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

“That's fine.”

“Remember one thing.”

“What, sir?”

“A good interview is not about asking more questions.”

Vaasanthi listened carefully. “It is about asking the right question.”

She wrote that sentence down.

A good interview is not about asking more questions. It is about asking the right question.

She did not know how important those words would become.

Two weeks later, she received her first major opportunity.

She was asked to interview a well-known doctor. Dr. Revathi.

The name meant little to Vaasanthi at first. Then she saw the profile. And everything changed.

Dr. Revathi was one of the country's respected gynaecologists.

She had spent years working in women's health.

She had written articles. Published papers. Conducted awareness programmes.

Worked with women from rural areas. Spoken about maternal health.

Menstrual health. Women's reproductive health.

And the social problems that prevented women from seeking timely medical care.

Vaasanthi began reading.

One article became another. Then another.

Soon she was sitting at her desk long after office hours, reading Dr. Revathi's work.

She underlined sentences. Made notes.

Looked up unfamiliar medical terms. Read interviews given by the doctor years earlier.

She watched old television appearances. She wanted to understand not just what Dr. Revathi had achieved, but why she had chosen that path.

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At midnight, Ravi passed her desk.

“You're still here?”

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow's interview?”

“Yes.”

“You've been preparing since morning.”

“I know.”

Ravi looked at the pile of papers.

“Are you interviewing the doctor or writing her biography?”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“Maybe both.”

He shook his head.

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

She continued reading.

And somewhere between the articles, research papers and old interviews, something unexpected happened.

Vaasanthi became genuinely interested in the woman she was going to interview.

Not as a celebrity. Not as a news subject. But as a person.

That was new. Until then, people had been stories to her.

Dr. Revathi was slowly becoming a person. And perhaps that was the first crack in the emotional wall Vaasanthi had built around herself.

The next morning, she arrived early.

Her questions were ready. Her notes were organized. Her research was complete.

But something was wrong. The scheduled interviewer had not arrived.

Then came the news. There had been an accident.The interviewer was hospitalized.

The office suddenly became tense.The interview could not be postponed.

Dr. Revathi had already arrived. The cameras were ready. The production team was waiting.

The management needed someone immediately. The news editor looked around.

Then his eyes stopped at Vaasanthi.

“Vaasanthi.”

She turned.

“Yes, sir?”

“You'll do it.”

She stared at him.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

She looked toward the studio.

The camera. The lights. Dr. Revathi.

For the first time since joining the channel, Vaasanthi felt genuinely frightened.

“Sir...”

“You know the subject.”

“Yes.”

“You've prepared.”

“Yes.”

“You have good communication skills.”

She remained silent.

“Go.”

Vaasanthi took a deep breath.She picked up her notes. She walked towards the studio.

Her hands were cold.Her heart was racing.

The girl who had stood confidently before traffic, accidents and angry crowds suddenly found herself afraid of sitting across from one woman.

She reached the studio door.She stopped. For a moment, she closed her eyes.

Then she remembered something her mother had once told her.

When Vaasanthi was preparing for her college entrance examination, she had been terrified.

Radha had simply said: **“You don't have to know everything. Just do what you know properly.”**

Vaasanthi opened her eyes.She walked inside. Dr. Revathi smiled at her.

“Are you conducting the interview?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“You look nervous.”

Vaasanthi smiled honestly.

“A little.”

Dr. Revathi laughed and said, “Good. Nervous people usually prepare well.”

Vaasanthi sat down.

The cameras were ready.

The countdown began.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

The red light came on.

Vaasanthi looked at Dr. Revathi.

And asked her first question.

She had no idea that the answer would change the direction of her career.

And eventually— the direction of her life.

Chapter 3:

The red light on the camera came on. The interview started.



For the first few seconds, Vaasanthi could hear nothing except the sound of her own heartbeat.

She looked at Dr. Revathi. The doctor smiled.It was a calm smile.

The kind of smile that made nervous people feel less nervous. Vaasanthi took a breath.

“Good morning. Today we have with us one of the country's most respected specialists in women's health, Dr. Revathi.”

She paused and said, “Doctor, thank you for joining us.”

“Thank you, Vaasanthi. It is a pleasure to be here.”

Vaasanthi looked down at her notes. Her first question was written clearly at the top. She had rehearsed it several times.

“Doctor, you have spent more than two decades working in women's health. What made you choose this field?”

It was a safe question. A professional question. The kind of question journalists often asked.

Dr. Revathi smiled and said, “That's a long story.”

Vaasanthi smiled back and replied, “We have time.”

The doctor laughed. And then she began.

Dr. Revathi had not originally planned to become a gynecologist.

As a young medical student, she had wanted to become a general physician.

But during her internship, she had witnessed something that stayed with her.

A young woman had come to the hospital after developing serious complications during pregnancy.

She was from a poor family. She had not received proper medical care during pregnancy.

Not because treatment was unavailable. Because she had never been taken to a doctor.

Her family had believed that pregnancy was a natural process and medical care was unnecessary unless something went seriously wrong.

By the time the woman reached the hospital, it was almost too late.

“She survived,” Dr. Revathi said.

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

“But that day I understood something.”

“What, doctor?”

“That medicine alone cannot save people.”

Vaasanthi's eyes remained on her.

“Awareness has to come first.”

Dr. Revathi leaned slightly forward.

“A woman must know when she needs help. Her family must understand it. Society must stop treating women's health as something that can be discussed only in whispers.”

Vaasanthi nodded. The interview continued.

The doctor spoke about maternal health. Menstrual health. Early diagnosis. Women's nutrition, The importance of emotional support during pregnancy.

The social pressure women faced. The hesitation to discuss certain medical problems.

Vaasanthi asked questions.

Dr. Revathi answered patiently.

The conversation began flowing naturally. The nervousness that had gripped Vaasanthi disappeared.

She stopped looking at her notes after a while. Instead, she listened. Really listened.

At one point, Dr. Revathi said,

“Sometimes a patient doesn't come to us because she doesn't trust the doctor.”

Vaasanthi immediately asked,

“Why wouldn't she trust the doctor?”

“Because she has spent years being told that her pain is normal.”

Vaasanthi paused.

There was something in that sentence.

She wrote it down. **She has spent years being told that her pain is normal.**

Then she asked another question.

“Doctor, what is the biggest mistake families make when it comes to women's health?”

Dr. Revathi did not answer immediately. She thought for a moment.

“Silence.”

Vaasanthi looked up.

“Silence?”

“Yes.”

The doctor nodded.

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“People remain silent because they are embarrassed. They remain silent because they are afraid. They remain silent because they don't want to create a problem. They remain silent because they think someone else will speak.”

She paused for some time, “And sometimes that silence causes more damage than the illness itself.”

Vaasanthi's pen stopped.cFor a moment, she forgot she was conducting an interview.

She simply looked at the doctor.....Silence.

The word felt strangely familiar. She did not know why.

Dr. Revathi continued.

“Communication can solve many problems. Not every problem, of course. But many.”

Vaasanthi slowly nodded.

“Sometimes people don't need a solution immediately,” Dr. Revathi said. “They need somebody to listen to them first.”

The sentence stayed with Vaasanthi. Somebody to listen.

She had spent much of her life wanting somebody to listen to her. And yet she had never thought of it that way.

The interview continued for nearly forty minutes.

By the time the producer signaled that they were nearing the end, Vaasanthi had completely forgotten her fear. She asked her final question.

“Doctor, if you could give one message to young women today, what would it be?”

Dr. Revathi smiled and said, “Never be afraid to speak.”

Vaasanthi waited.

“Speak about your health.”

The doctor continued.

“Speak about your dreams.”

A pause.

“Speak when something hurts.”

Another pause.

“And speak when a relationship matters to you.”

Vaasanthi looked at her.

That last sentence had not been expected.

Dr. Revathi smiled.

“Silence does not always protect relationships, Vaasanthi.”

The journalist remained quiet.

“Sometimes,” the doctor continued, “silence slowly destroys them.”

The camera continued recording. But Vaasanthi felt as though the words had been spoken directly to her.

She did not know why. She simply thanked the doctor.

“Thank you very much for joining us.”

“Thank you.”

The red light went off. The interview was over.

For several seconds, Vaasanthi remained seated. The studio suddenly felt very quiet.

The lights were still on. The cameras were being adjusted. Technicians were moving around.

People were talking. But she felt strangely detached from all of it.

Dr. Revathi stood up.

She walked toward Vaasanthi.

“You did very well.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“Thank you, ma'am.”

“You were nervous in the beginning.”

“Yes.”

“I could tell.”

Vaasanthi laughed.

“I thought I was hiding it.”

“You were not.”

Both smiled.

Dr. Revathi then said something Vaasanthi would remember for years.

“You don't interview like someone who wants answers.”

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Vaasanthi looked at her.

“You interview like someone who wants to understand.”

She didn't know what to say.

“That's a rare quality,” the doctor added.

Vaasanthi thanked her. But she did not fully understand the compliment.

Not yet.

The moment Vaasanthi walked out of the studio, Ravi was waiting.

“How was it?”

“Good.”

“Just good?”

“I think so.”

Ravi laughed and said, “Everyone inside is saying you did very well.”

She looked surprised.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

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The news editor came toward them.

“Vaasanthi.”

She turned.

“Yes, sir?”

“That was excellent.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I watched the entire interview.”

He nodded approvingly.

“You didn't stick to the script.”

“I followed the conversation.”

“Exactly.”

He looked at her for a moment and said, “That's what we need.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

Then he added, “We want you to do more interviews.”

She blinked.

“More?”

“Yes.”

“Regularly?”

“Very regularly.”

She looked at Ravi. He raised his eyebrows as though to say, *I told you so*.

The editor continued. “We'll start assigning you personalities from different fields.”

Vaasanthi nodded. “I'll prepare.”

“I know you will.”

He walked away.

Ravi looked at her.

“Congratulations.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“Thank you.”

“Do you know what this means?”

“What?”

“You've escaped traffic reporting.”

She laughed.

“Don't celebrate too soon.

That evening, Vaasanthi returned home earlier than usual. Radha was surprised.

“You're home already?”

“Yes.”

“How was work?”

“Good.”

Radha looked at her and asked, “You seem happy.”

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Vaasanthi smiled and replied, “I did an interview today.”

“Who?”

“A doctor. Dr. Revathi.”

“Was it good?”

“It was very good.”

Radha placed a cup of tea in front of her.

“What did she say?”

Vaasanthi began telling her about the interview.

She spoke about the doctor's work.

Her views. Her journey. The challenges women faced. And then she repeated one particular sentence.

“Amma, she said silence can destroy relationships.”

Radha's hand stopped. Only for a second. Vaasanthi noticed.

“Why?”

“Nothing.”

“You stopped.”

“I didn't.”

“You did.”

Radha sat down and said, “Some people say many things.”

Vaasanthi watched her.

“Do you agree with her?”

Radha looked away.

“About what?”

“About silence.”

Radha took a sip of tea and said, “Sometimes silence is necessary.”

Vaasanthi said nothing. Radha continued.

“Not everything has to be spoken.”

“Why?”

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“Because speaking can make things worse.”

Vaasanthi thought about that.

“Or better.”

Radha looked at her and replied, “Not always.”

“Maybe.”

The conversation ended there. But something had changed. Not between mother and daughter.

Inside Vaasanthi.

For the first time, she began wondering whether silence was always strength.

Until then, she had believed that not asking questions was a form of self-protection.

Now she was beginning to wonder whether silence could also be a form of surrender.

Over the next few weeks, her life changed. Her first major interview was broadcast.

The response was excellent. Viewers appreciated the conversation. The management received positive feedback.

Soon she was assigned another interview…. Then another. A singer…. A composer…. A social activist….An author…..A theatre artist….A school principal…..An entrepreneur…..A sportsperson.

Every person had a different story. And every story required a different kind of questions.

Vaasanthi began preparing differently. She no longer wanted to know only what someone had achieved.

She wanted to know what had happened before the achievement.

What had they lost?

Who had supported them?

Who had discouraged them?

What had made them continue?

What had they learned?

What had they sacrificed?

Slowly, the interviews became less about achievements and more about journeys. And Vaasanthi discovered something fascinating. Almost everyone had suffered.

The singer who filled stadiums had once been rejected by music producers.

The composer who created beautiful melodies had once struggled to pay rent. The social activist who spoke confidently on television had once been afraid to speak in public.

The entrepreneur who now employed hundreds of people had once failed twice.

The athlete who received international recognition had once been told that sports were not meant for women.

Everybody had a story.And most of those stories had one thing in common. At some point, somebody had taken a first step.

A teacher had encouraged them. A friend had helped them. A parent had trusted them. Or they themselves had decided not to give up.

Vaasanthi began noticing the pattern.

Success rarely arrived suddenly. It usually began with a small decision.

A decision to try.

A decision to speak.

A decision to forgive.

A decision to continue.

A decision to take the first step.

She did not yet know that one day she would have to take that step herself.

One afternoon, she received another assignment.

“Vaasanthi,” the producer called.

“Yes?”

“Tomorrow's interview.”

“Who is it?”

The producer smiled.

“You'll like this one.”

“Who?”

“A sportswoman.”

“Which sport?”

“International level.”

Vaasanthi picked up the file.

The name was unfamiliar.

She opened it.

She began reading.

Within minutes, her expression changed.

The woman had won an in ernational championship. But the story behind the medal was extraordinary.

She had been discouraged from entering sports. Her family had struggled financially. She had trained without proper equipment.

She had been mocked…Rejected…..Criticized….And yet she had continued.

Vaasanthi read the file again.

Then once more….She looked at the photograph attached to the profile.

The woman was standing on a podium holding an international medal…. She was smiling.

But Vaasanthi had already learned something. A photograph showed the moment. An interview revealed the journey.

She closed the file. Tomorrow, she would listen to another story.

She did not know that this particular story would bring tears to her eyes for the first time during an interview.

And when those tears came, Vaasanthi would realize that the wall she had built around her heart was no longer as strong as it used to be.

The people she interviewed were slowly breaking it down.

One story at a time…. One truth at a time….. One human bond at a time.

Chapter 4:

The next morning, Vaasanthi arrived at the news channel earlier than usual.

She had spent almost half the previous night reading about the woman she was going to interview.

Her name was Meera Krishnan.

Meera was an internationally recognized athlete who had recently won a prestigious international championship, bringing glory to India. Her photograph had appeared in newspapers, sports magazines and television channels. Politicians had congratulated her. Sporting organizations had celebrated her achievement. Social media was filled with messages praising her determination.

To the world, Meera was a champion. To Vaasanthi, she was a story waiting to be understood.

Vaasanthi sat at her desk, reading the profile once again.

Meera had grown up in a small town in southern India. Her father worked in a government office, and her mother was a homemaker. The family lived a modest life, managing its expenses carefully.

Meera had discovered her interest in athletics when she was eleven years old.

During a school sports day, she had participated in a running race almost by accident. One of her teachers had noticed her speed and encouraged her to train seriously.

That small encouragement had changed the direction of her life. But the road ahead had been anything but easy.

Her family had initially opposed her decision to pursue sports. Relatives questioned the purpose of allowing a girl to spend so much time running around a ground. Neighbours made comments about her clothes, her training schedule and her future.

Some told her parents that sports would distract her from her studies.

Others said that a girl who spent her days training would find it difficult to adjust to family life later.

A few were even more direct.

What is the point of all this running? Will it give her a secure future?

Vaasanthi read those lines twice. She had heard similar questions when she chose journalism.

Different professions. Different circumstances. But the discouragement sounded strangely familiar.

She turned the page.

There were photographs of Meera training on an uneven ground, competing in local competitions and receiving her first district-level medal.

The early photographs showed a thin young girl with a determined expression.

The later ones showed a confident athlete standing on international podiums.

Between those photographs lay years of struggle that no camera could fully capture.

Vaasanthi closed the file. She wanted to hear those years from Meera herself.

Not from the newspaper articles. Not from the official profile. From the woman who had lived them.

At eleven o'clock, Meera arrived at the studio.

She wore a simple blue salwar kameez. Her hair was tied neatly, and a small handbag hung from her shoulder.

There was no grand entrance. No entourage. No attempt to draw attention.

She greeted the staff warmly and thanked the receptionist who showed her the way.

When she entered the studio, Vaasanthi stood up.

“Good morning, ma'am. Welcome to our channel.”

“Good morning.”

“I'm Vaasanthi. I'll be interviewing you today.”

Meera smiled and said, “I know. I watched your interview with Dr. Revathi.”

Vaasanthi was pleasantly surprised and asked, “You watched it?”

“Yes. It was a very good conversation.”

“Thank you so much.”

“I especially liked the way you allowed her to finish her answers without interrupting.”

Vaasanthi smiled. She had never imagined that someone she admired would have watched her work.

“Thank you, ma'am. I'm glad you liked it.”

Meera sat down.

For a few minutes, they spoke casually about the championship, the training schedule and the journey that had brought Meera to the studio.

Then the cameraman gave the signal….The lights came on….The producer began the countdown.

Five…..Four…..Three…..Two… One.

Vaasanthi turned towards the camera.

“Good morning. Today, we have with us a woman who has made our country proud through her remarkable achievement in international sports. Her journey is not simply about winning medals. It is about determination, sacrifice and the courage to continue when circumstances are not in your favour.”

She turned towards Meera.

“Meera, welcome to our programme.”

“Thank you, Vaasanthi.”

“Let me begin with a simple question. When you stood on that international podium and received your medal, what was the first thought that came to your mind?”

Meera smiled.

“Honestly?”

“Please.”

“I thought about my mother.”

Vaasanthi leaned forward slightly.

“Your mother?”

“Yes. I thought about all the mornings she woke up before me to prepare my food. I thought about the days when she waited for me to return from training. I thought about the money she quietly saved because she knew I needed new shoes.”

Meera paused and said, “And I thought about the day she told me that perhaps I should stop running.”

Vaasanthi looked surprised.

“Your mother asked you to stop?”

Meera nodded. “Yes. But not because she didn't love me.”

She smiled faintly.

“She was afraid.”

Meera's early training days had been difficult.

Her school had a small playground, but it was not suitable for serious athletic training. The surface was uneven, and during the rainy season, parts of it became muddy.

She had no professional coach initially. A physical education teacher helped her with basic training and guided her towards a district sports academy.

The academy was far from her home. Travelling every day cost money the family could barely spare. Her father worried about the expenses. Her mother worried about everything else.

What if she injured herself?

What if she failed?

What if she sacrificed her education and never achieved anything in sports?

What if society was right?

For months, the family discussed the matter repeatedly. Meera listened to their concerns. She understood them. But she could not abandon the dream that had taken root inside her.

One evening, her father called her into the living room.

“Meera, sit down.”

She sat beside him.

“We have been thinking about your training.”

She waited.

“You are doing well in your studies. Why don't you concentrate on that? You can finish your education and get a good job.”

“Daddy, I can study and train.”

“You are already finding it difficult to manage both.”

“I will work harder.”

Her father sighed. “Sports is uncertain. What will happen if you don't succeed?”

Meera did not have an answer that she could guarantee success. She was only a teenager. She could not promise that she would win medals. She could not promise that she would become famous. She could not promise that every sacrifice would be rewarded.

All she could promise was that she would try. She said confidencely, “Daddy, I don't know whether I will win.”

Her father looked at her and said, “But I know that if I stop now, I will always wonder what would have happened if I had continued.”

Her father remained silent. Her mother sat nearby, listening.

Meera continued.

“Please give me some time. Let me try properly. If I fail, I will accept it. But I don't want to stop before I have even tried.”

Her father looked at his daughter for a long time. He did not agree immediately. But neither did he refuse.

That evening, Meera went to bed without knowing what the decision would be. The following morning, her mother woke her up early. There was a plate of breakfast on the table. Beside it lay a small packet.

Meera opened it. Inside was a pair of running shoes. They were not expensive. They were not the best shoes available. But they were new.

Meera looked at her mother and said, “Amma...”

Her mother adjusted the strap of her daughter's sports bag.

“Your father said you can continue training for six months. After that, we will discuss it again.”

Meera's eyes filled with tears.

“Thank you, Amma.”

Her mother looked away, pretending to be busy. She said, “Don't thank me. Just make sure you eat properly. You cannot run on an empty stomach.”

Meera hugged her. That hug became one of the most important memories of her life.

Years later, when she stood on international podiums, she would remember those shoes.

Not because they made her run faster. Because they reminded her that somebody had taken a chance on her before she had achieved anything.

Back in the studio, Vaasanthi listened without interrupting. She had heard countless stories about people succeeding despite difficulties. But Meera's story had something different.

It was not only about determination. It was also about the people who stood beside a dream when the outcome was uncertain.

Vaasanthi asked, “Did those six months change your life?”

“They changed everything.”

“How?”

“I began training seriously. I stopped wasting time. I understood that my parents had taken a risk by allowing me to continue, and I didn't want their trust to be wasted.”

“Did you win during those six months?”

Meera laughed and said, “No. I lost more competitions than I won.”

Vaasanthi smiled. “Then how did you convince your parents to let you continue?”

Meera's expression became thoughtful.

“I didn't convince them with words. I tried to convince them through my efforts.”

She paused.

“Sometimes, when people are worried about your future, they cannot understand your dream simply because you explain it to them. They need to see your commitment.”

Vaasanthi wrote something in her notebook.

Meera noticed and asked, “Are you writing that down?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“You can use it. I am giving it to you for free.”

They both laughed. The atmosphere in the studio became warmer.

Vaasanthi asked about Meera's training routine, her diet, her education and the sacrifices required to compete at the highest level.

Meera answered every question with honesty. Then Vaasanthi reached a question she had marked with a small star.

“Meera, you have spoken about your family supporting you eventually. But what about the people outside your family? Were they encouraging?”

Meera shook her head and said, “Not always.”

“What kind of comments did you hear?”

Meera looked directly at her.

“Many things. That I should behave like a girl. That I should spend more time learning household responsibilities. That sports would make me too independent. That I was wasting my youth.”

She smiled without bitterness.

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“Some people said I would regret my decision when I grew older.”

“Did those comments hurt you?”

“Of course.”

Vaasanthi had not expected such a straightforward answer. Meera continued.

“I am not made of stone. I heard those comments. Sometimes I went home and cried. Sometimes I wondered whether I was doing something wrong.”

“Then how did you overcome them?”

“I didn't overcome them every day.”

Vaasanthi looked at her.

“Some days, I was strong. Some days, I wasn't. Some days, I ignored people. Some days, their words stayed in my mind throughout training.”

Meera paused.

“But eventually I understood something.”

“What was that?”

“People can have opinions about your life without having to live the consequences of those opinions.”

The sentence fell into the studio like a stone into still water.

Vaasanthi stopped writing. Meera continued gently.

“They could tell me to stop. But if I stopped, I would be the one living with the regret. They would go on with their lives.”

She looked at Vaasanthi.

“So I began listening less to people who wanted to decide my future and listening more to the people who genuinely wanted me to do well.”

Vaasanthi nodded slowly. She knew exactly what Meera meant. She remembered the relatives who had questioned her decision to enter journalism.

She remembered the warnings about unstable careers and difficult working hours. She remembered how she had kept going despite their criticism.

For the first time, she saw her own experience reflected in the life of someone she deeply admired.

The circumstances were different. The lesson was the same. Not every voice deserved the authority to decide the direction of one's life.

The interview continued for another twenty minutes. Meera spoke about her first major defeat.

She spoke about an injury that had forced her to stop training for several months. She spoke about watching other athletes move ahead while she struggled to recover.

She spoke about the fear that her opportunity might disappear before she was ready to compete again.

During that period, she had nearly given up. Her coach had helped her return to training gradually.

Her mother had continued encouraging her. Her father, who had once questioned her dream, had become one of her strongest supporters.

“He started waking up early to take me to training,” Meera said.

Vaasanthi smiled.

“That must have felt wonderful.”

“It did.”

“Did he ever tell you that he was proud of you?”

Meera laughed softly and said, “My father is not a man who expresses his feelings easily.”

Vaasanthi became still.Meera continued, unaware of the effect her words were having.

“He doesn't say much. But he shows it in small ways. He makes sure I have eaten. He asks whether I need anything. He watches my competitions, even when he doesn't understand the sport.”

She paused.

“Sometimes, love is present in a person's actions long before it appears in their words.”

Vaasanthi looked down at her notes. For a moment, she could not bring herself to ask the next question.

Her thoughts had travelled somewhere far away. To an old photograph.

A little girl sitting on her father's shoulders….A man standing beneath a rain tree….An umbrella…Two pairs of eyes meeting across a road.

She remembered the way Kishan had looked at her before turning away. She remembered how badly she had wanted to run towards him.

And how she had remained where she was. She had spent years telling herself that she did not need a father's affection.

But what if the truth was that she had learned to live without something she had always wanted?

She blinked and returned to the interview. Meera was looking at her.

“Vaasanthi? Are you all right?”

Vaasanthi quickly smiled.

“Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry. I was thinking about what you said.”

Meera nodded and said, “It happens.”

Vaasanthi took a breath she replied, “May I ask you something personal?”

“Of course.”

“If you had failed to win that international championship, would you still consider your journey successful?”

Meera did not answer immediately.She looked at the camera and then back at Vaasanthi.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because the medal is only one part of my life.”

She folded her hands in her lap.

“Sports taught me discipline. It taught me how to handle defeat. It taught me to respect other people's efforts. It taught me that a person's value does not disappear because of one failure.”

She paused.

“And it taught me not to judge people too quickly.”

Vaasanthi leaned forward.

“Can you explain that?”

Meera nodded.

“When I was young, I thought my father didn't understand me because he didn't support my dream immediately. Later, I understood that he was afraid I would suffer.”

She smiled.

“He was wrong to doubt me, perhaps. But his fear came from concern, not from a lack of love.”

Vaasanthi's fingers tightened around her pen.

Meera continued.

“People are complicated. Sometimes they hurt us because they are selfish. Sometimes they hurt us because they are afraid. Sometimes they make mistakes because they don't know how to express what they feel.”

She paused.

“That doesn't mean we should accept every hurtful thing people do. But if we want to understand a relationship, we must sometimes understand the person behind the mistake.”

Vaasanthi looked at her. For several seconds, she said nothing. Then, in a quieter voice, she asked,

“Meera, do you believe every relationship deserves a second chance?”

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Meera considered the question carefully.

“No.”

Vaasanthi was surprised. Meera continued.

“Some relationships are harmful. Some people repeatedly hurt others and refuse to change. In those situations, maintaining distance may be the right decision.”

She leaned forward slightly.

“But I believe every important relationship deserves an honest attempt at understanding, whenever it is safe to do so.”

She paused.

“Before deciding that a relationship has no future, we should ask ourselves whether we have truly listened to the other person's side.”

Vaasanthi felt something tighten in her chest.

“Even after a long time?”

“Even after a long time.”

“What if the silence has continued for years?”

Meera smiled sadly.

“Then it may be more difficult. But time alone doesn't tell us whether a conversation is worth having.”

She looked directly at Vaasanthi.

“Sometimes we spend years waiting for the other person to speak first. We think that if they care, they will come to us. They think the same thing. And two people who may still care about each other continue living as strangers.”

The studio seemed unusually quiet. Vaasanthi had no further question prepared.

For the first time in her career, she was not looking for the next question. She was struggling with the answer she had just received.

The interview ended a few minutes later. The camera light went off. The producer signaled that they had completed the recording.

Meera stood up. Vaasanthi rose from her chair.

“Thank you so much, ma'am. That was a wonderful conversation.”

“Thank you, Vaasanthi.”

Meera looked at her carefully.

“You asked some good questions.”

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“Thank you.”

“And you listened well.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

Meera picked up her handbag.

“May I tell you something?”

“Please.”

“You seemed different during the last few minutes.”

Vaasanthi felt embarrassed.

“I'm sorry if I—”

“No, no. Nothing to apologize for.”

Meera smiled warmly. “Some answers touch us because they remind us of something in our own lives.”

Vaasanthi did not respond. Meera did not press her. She simply said goodbye and walked towards the exit.

Vaasanthi watched her leave. For a few seconds, she remained beside the chair. Then she sat down again.

She opened her notebook. At the bottom of the final page, she wrote three sentences.

People can be afraid and still love us. Silence can make two people strangers.

Before deciding that a relationship is over, listen to the other person's side.

She read the sentences. Then she closed the notebook. She did not want to think about her father Kishan.

Not today. Not after fifteen years of trying to put the subject behind her.

Yet, for the first time, she was no longer entirely certain that she had understood her own story.

Ravi was waiting outside the studio. He looked at her face.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Don't tell me nothing. You look as though you have just watched an emotional film.”

Vaasanthi tried to smile.

“The interview was good.”

“I know. I was there.”

He waited. She remained quiet.

Ravi lowered his voice and said, “Did something she said upset you?”

Vaasanthi shook her head and replied, “No. Not upset.”

“Then?”

She looked at him.

“Have you ever stopped speaking to someone for a long time?”

Ravi thought for a moment.

“Of course. Who hasn't?”

“Have you ever wanted to speak to that person again but waited for them to approach you first?”

Ravi's expression changed.

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“We both waited.”

Vaasanthi stared at him. “And?”

“And after some time, it became awkward to speak. Then more time passed. Eventually, we stopped thinking about it.”

“Did you ever regret it?”

Ravi nodded and said, “Sometimes.”

“Then why didn't you speak?”

He gave a small laugh. “Ego, perhaps. Or embarrassment. Or the feeling that the other person should have called first.”

He paused for some time and said, “Sometimes you don't even know why you keep waiting. You just do.”

Vaasanthi looked away. Ravi studied her for a moment.

“Is this about your family?”

She did not answer. He understood that she did not want to discuss it So he changed the subject.

“Come on. We have to submit the recording.”

They walked back towards the editing room. But Ravi's words remained with her.

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We both waited. That evening, Vaasanthi returned home with an unusual heaviness in her heart.

Radha was in the kitchen preparing dinner. “Have you eaten?” her mother asked.

“Not yet.” Vaasanthi replied.

“Wash your hands. I'll serve you.”

Vaasanthi went to her room. She changed her clothes and opened her cupboard. The old box was still there.

She had not looked at it since the afternoon she discovered the photograph. She stood before it for a long time. Then she took it out. She opened the lid.

The photograph lay exactly where she had left it. Kishan, her father was smiling. Young Vaasanthi was sitting on his shoulders, holding his hair. She looked at the photograph until her eyes began to hurt.

Then she turned it over. The date was still written on the back. She was five years old. She tried to remember the day.

Had they gone to a park? Had her father bought her ice cream? Had he carried her home when she fell asleep?

She could not remember clearly. The photograph had preserved a moment that her memory had almost lost.

For the first time, she wondered whether there were other memories she had forgotten.

She sat on the bed. She held the photograph in both hands. Then she whispered a question she had never allowed herself to ask aloud.

“Daddy, why did you leave me?”

The room offered no answer. Vaasanthi wiped her eyes quickly. She was surprised to find them wet.

She had not cried about her father in years. She had convinced herself that she had outgrown the need for his affection. But a person can learn to live without something and still feel its absence.

She placed the photograph on her bedside table. Then she went to dinner. Radha served her food.

“Why are you so quiet today?” she asked.

“I'm tired, Amma.”

“Did something happen at work?”

“No.”

Radha looked at her daughter and asked, “Are you sure?”

Vaasanthi nodded.

She wanted to ask about Kishan. She wanted to know what had happened. She wanted to understand why fifteen years had passed without a conversation.

But the questions remained inside her. She could not bring herself to ask. Not yet.

Later that night, Vaasanthi lay awake. She thought about Meera's father.

A man who had doubted his daughter's dream but eventually supported it.

A man who had learned to express his affection through small acts. A man whose daughter understood that his fear had not necessarily meant a lack of love.

Then she thought about Kishan.

Had he ever been afraid? Had he ever regretted the separation? Had he ever wanted to explain himself?

She remembered the attempts he had made to contact them. She remembered her mother's refusal.

She remembered the sentence that had defined her childhood. He is not part of our life anymore.

Until that day, she had accepted it as a fact. Now she wondered whether it had been a decision.

And whether that decision had been made before she was old enough to understand it.

She turned towards the bedside table. The photograph was visible in the dim light. For a moment, she reached towards it. Then she stopped.

She was not ready to reopen the past. She was not ready to question her mother. She was not ready to meet her father. But something had begun.

A question had entered her mind. And unlike the questions of her childhood, this one refused to disappear.

What if understanding someone requires us to listen to the words they never got the chance to say?

Vaasanthi closed her eyes. Sleep came slowly.

The next morning, she would return to her work.

There would be another assignment, another interview, another person with a story to tell.

She would continue learning about courage, failure, sacrifice and perseverance.

But the woman who had entered the studio that morning was not quite the same woman who left it.

For the first time, Vaasanthi had allowed herself to consider a possibility she had spent years avoiding.

Perhaps relationships did not always end because love had disappeared.

Perhaps, sometimes, they ended because hurt remained unspoken, pride refused to move, and nobody was willing to begin the conversation.

She did not yet know what she would do with that thought. She only knew that she could no longer pretend she had never had it.

And somewhere, in another part of the city, Kishan was still living with a silence that had lasted almost fifteen years.

He did not know that his daughter had begun asking questions. He did not know that a conversation in a television studio had brought his memory back into her heart.

And he certainly did not know that the daughter he had waited so long to speak to was slowly moving towards the truth.

Not with a dramatic decision. Not with a sudden declaration. But with the first small step that every meaningful change requires.

The willingness to question what she had always believed.

Chapter 5:

The following Monday morning, Vaasanthi reached the news channel office earlier than usual.

The previous few days had been different from the days that came before them. She still woke up at the same time, drank coffee with her mother, travelled to the office, prepared her reports, and returned home late in the evening. Nothing in her daily routine had changed.

Yet something inside her had begun to move.

For fifteen years, she had carried a story about her father without ever questioning it. In that story, Kishan was the man who had left, Radha was the woman who had suffered, and Vaasanthi was the little girl who had learned to live without expecting anything from anyone.

It was a simple story. Perhaps too simple.

Now, for the first time, she wondered whether there could be another side to it.

She disliked that thought.

It disturbed the certainty she had built her life around. Certainty, even when painful, was comfortable. Questions were dangerous because they demanded answers, and answers sometimes required people to change.

Vaasanthi was not ready to change. At least, that was what she kept telling herself.

“Good morning, madam!”

Ravi's cheerful voice interrupted her thoughts.

She looked up from her desk. “Why are you calling me madam today?”

“Because you have become a famous interviewer. Soon, you may refuse to travel with an ordinary cameraman like me.”

“Then I will have to find an ordinary cameraman who knows how to irritate me better than you do.”

Ravi laughed.

Their editor, Pradeep, walked out of his cabin carrying a file.

“Vaasanthi, are you ready for today's assignment?”

She straightened in her chair. “Who is it, sir?”

“Sukanya Rao. The singer.”

Vaasanthi knew the name well. Sukanya Rao was one of the most respected playback and classical-fusion singers in the country. Her voice had appeared in films, television programmes, devotional albums, and live concerts. She had won several awards and performed on international stages. Her songs were known for their emotional depth, and people often said that she could make an ordinary lyric feel like a personal memory.

“She is coming to our studio?” Vaasanthi asked.

“Yes. We have forty-five minutes with her. The interview should cover her musical journey, her struggles, her family, and what keeps her connected to music despite her success. Don't make it another routine celebrity conversation.”

“I'll prepare, sir.”

Pradeep paused before returning to his cabin.

“One more thing. Ask questions that make her comfortable enough to speak honestly. But remember, an interview is not an interrogation. We are there to understand a person, not to extract a confession.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

She had heard similar advice from Dr. Revathi. She had experienced it again while interviewing Meera Krishnan. The most meaningful conversations did not happen when the interviewer asked the largest number of questions. They happened when the interviewer gave someone the space to answer.

She opened the file.

Sukanya Rao's life seemed, at first glance, like a beautiful success story. A childhood surrounded by music, years of rigorous training, early rejection, a breakthrough song, awards, concerts, and public recognition.

But Vaasanthi had begun to understand that a biography could tell her what a person had achieved without revealing what those achievements had cost.

She started reading. By noon, she had filled several pages with questions.

At one point, she came across an article in which Sukanya had said, *“Some songs are not sung for an audience. They are sung for the person we wish were listening.”*

Vaasanthi read the sentence twice. Then she underlined it. She did not know why it stayed with her.

Perhaps because, in some quiet corner of her heart, she too had spent years wishing that someone were listening.

Someone who had never been given the opportunity to speak.

Sukanya Rao arrived at the studio at three in the afternoon.

She was dressed in a simple kurthi dress, with and her hair left loosely behind her neck. There was nothing extravagant about her appearance. She carried herself with the quiet confidence of someone who had spent years being heard by thousands of people and had no need to prove that she deserved their attention.

Vaasanthi greeted her and introduced herself. The interview started.



Vaasanthi started,

“I have listened to several of your songs,” she said. “But I was particularly interested in the way you speak about music. You seem to see it as something beyond a profession.”

Sukanya smiled.

“Music became my profession much later. Before that, it was simply the language of my home.”

The answer caught Vaasanthi's attention.

“The language of your home?”

“Yes. My father was a music teacher. We were not a wealthy family, but there was always music in our house. My father would practice in the mornings, my mother would hum while cooking, and I would sit beside him trying to imitate every note. We didn't have many luxuries, but we never felt that anything was missing.”

She paused and smiled at the memory.

“When I was little, I thought every house in the world must sound like ours.”

Vaasanthi smiled too.

“What was the first song you learned?”

“A small devotional song my father taught me. I don't remember the exact age, but I remember the place. I was sitting on the floor beside his harmonium. I kept getting the same note wrong. He corrected me so many times that I became angry and refused to sing.”

“What did he do?”

“He stopped playing.”

“And then?”

“He waited.”

Sukanya laughed softly and said, “He waited until I came back on my own. Then he taught me the note again.”

Vaasanthi looked down at her prepared questions. She had planned to begin with Sukanya's first major award, but now she changed her mind.

“Do you think that is what made you a good musician? The patience your father showed you?”

“Perhaps. He taught me that a wrong note is not the end of a song. You listen, correct yourself, and begin again.”

Sukanya looked directly at Vaasanthi.

“Unfortunately, I understood that lesson much better in music than I did in life.”

For a moment, neither woman spoke. The studio camera was running. Ravi stood behind it, watching the conversation through the monitor.

Vaasanthi leaned forward slightly.

“Would you like to tell us what you mean?”

Sukanya took a breath.

“Yes. I think I can.”

When Sukanya was twenty-three, she received her first major opportunity in the film industry.

A music director had heard her perform at a small cultural programme and invited her to record a song. The recording went well, and the song became popular after the film's release.

Within months, Sukanya was receiving offers from several music directors. Her schedule became crowded. She travelled between cities, attended recording sessions, and began performing at large concerts.

Her father was proud of her. He was also worried.

He had spent his life teaching music to children in a small town. He understood discipline, practice, and the dignity of hard work. But he knew very little about the world his daughter was entering.

He worried about her travelling alone, about late-night recordings, about contracts she might not understand, and about people who might take advantage of a young woman eager to succeed.

He expressed his worries as objections. Sukanya heard those objections as a lack of faith.

One evening, when she returned home after a recording session, her father told her that she should consider refusing an upcoming tour. The organisers wanted her to travel for several weeks, and he was uncomfortable with the arrangement.

“You have just started your career,” he said. “Why take such a risk? There will be other opportunities.”

Sukanya was exhausted. She had spent the day travelling and recording, and she had been looking forward to telling him about a new offer.

Instead, she heard another warning.

“Daddy, you never believe I can manage anything on my own.”

“That is not what I said.”

“You don't have to say it. Every time something good happens, you find a reason why I shouldn't do it.”

“I am trying to protect you.”

“I don't need protection from my own dreams.”

Her father fell silent. Sukanya continued speaking, allowing years of frustration to escape in a few angry sentences.

“You taught me music, but you don't want me to become anything beyond the little world you know. You want me to remain the same girl sitting beside your harmonium.”

Her father looked at her for a long moment and said, “I only want you to be safe.”

“Then let me take some own decisions in life.”

****

He did not stop her when she left the room. But neither did he call her back.

Sukanya travelled for the tour. It was successful. She received new offers and began to establish herself as a singer in her own right.

She expected her father to call. He did not.

She told herself that he was upset and would eventually understand. He expected her to call.

She did not. He told himself that she was busy and would eventually remember home.

Days became weeks.

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After the world tour she came back to home. But she did not speak to her father.

Her dad also did not speak.....Weeks became months.

Her mother occasionally tried to bridge the distance, but every conversation became an exercise in avoiding the subject.

Both were there in home but did not try to speak to each other.

Both were in home. The distance was only few feets.

But the distance in their hearts were like more than 10,000 nautcle miles.

But when ever sukanya went to tour she used to ask her mother, “How is Daddy?”

“He is fine,” her mother would reply.

“Is he still angry?”

“He doesn't say much.”

Sukanya would wait for her mother to add something more.

Perhaps that her father missed her. Perhaps that he had asked about her latest recording. Perhaps that he had listened to her song on the radio.

But her mother would change the subject. Sukanya did not realise that her father was waiting for the same kind of reassurance from her.

He listened to her songs whenever they played on the radio. Sometimes, he would tell his students about her latest achievement. He kept newspaper clippings about her performances in an old folder.

He never told her any of this. She never asked. And so the silence continued.

“Did you ever think of calling him?” Vaasanthi asked.

Sukanya nodded and said, “Hundreds of times.”

“Then what stopped you?”

“Initially, anger. I felt he should understand that he had hurt me. I wanted him to call first, to admit that he had been wrong, and to tell me he believed in me.”

“And later?”

“Later, pride became involved. By then, I had been successful for some time. I began to feel that if I called him, he might think I had accepted that I was wrong.”

Sukanya looked down at her hands and said, “It sounds foolish when I say it aloud.”

“It doesn't sound foolish,” Vaasanthi replied. “It sounds human.”

Sukanya gave a faint smile.

“Thank you. But something can be human and still cause unnecessary pain.”

She continued.

“Two years passed. Then three. I kept thinking I would call after the next concert, after the next award, after the next important event. I imagined that one day he would hear about my success and realise that I had been right to follow my dreams.”

“Did he?”

“I don't know what he realised. He never told me.”

“Did you ever tell him what you wanted him to understand?”

Sukanya looked up.

“No.”

The answer was simple, but it seemed to settle heavily between them.

“I wanted him to understand me without my having to explain myself,” she continued. “And I think he wanted the same thing from me. He wanted me to understand his worries without his having to admit that he was afraid. We both wanted to be understood. Neither of us wanted to take the first step toward understanding the other.”

Vaasanthi's fingers tightened around her pen. She thought of her father standing beneath the rain tree.

She thought of Radha refusing to answer the door when Kishan came to see her.

She thought of all the years in which one person's decision had become another person's reality.

“Was there a particular moment when you realised how much time had passed?” she asked.

Sukanya's expression changed and said, “Yes. And I remember it very clearly.”

It happened during a concert in Chennai.

Sukanya had been invited to perform at a large music festival. The audience was enthusiastic, and the concert was going beautifully. She had sung several popular songs when the organisers requested that she perform something from her childhood.

Without planning to, she began singing the devotional song her father had taught her.

The same song..... The same melody.

The same sequence of notes she had struggled to learn as a little girl sitting beside his harmonium.

As she sang, she remembered his patient voice correcting her. She remembered the way he tapped his fingers to keep the rhythm. She remembered how he would close his eyes when she finally sang a phrase correctly.

And suddenly, the stage lights seemed too bright. The audience disappeared behind a blur of faces.

For the first time in years, Sukanya did not think about whether the song sounded perfect. She thought only about the person who had first taught it to her.

She wondered whether he had heard it that evening. She wondered whether he still listened to her music.

She wondered whether he was sitting in their old house, perhaps beside the same harmonium, listening to a recording of his daughter whom he had not spoken to in three years.

The final note faded. The audience applauded.

Sukanya bowed, smiled, and continued with the programme.

But the moment had changed something inside her.

After the concert, she sat alone in her hotel room and looked at her phone. Her father's number was still saved in her contacts. She had never deleted it.

She opened the number and stared at it for several minutes. Then she put the phone down.

She picked it up again. Her mind began offering reasons to wait.

It is too late tonight.

He may be sleeping.

What if he doesn't answer?

What if he answers and asks why I am calling now?

What if he is still angry?

She had faced enormous audiences without fear. She had sung before people who could make or break her career. She had travelled to unfamiliar places and learned to survive in a demanding industry.

Yet the thought of making one phone call frightened her more than any stage had ever frightened her.

Finally, she pressed the call button. It rang.

Once.....Twice.....Three times.

Someone answered.

“Hello?”

It was her father. For a moment, Sukanya could not speak.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“Daddy…”

The word came out as a whisper. Silence followed. Then she heard him say her name.

“Sukanya?”

She closed her eyes and said, “Yes, Daddy. It's me.”

He did not immediately ask where she had been or why she had taken so long to call.

Instead, he asked a question that broke her heart.

“Are you all right, ma?”

Sukanya began to cry.

“Yes, Daddy. I'm all right.” She said with lot of difficulty.

“Have you eaten?” her asked.

The same affection she realized in her father’s words. Even after 3 years of silence…

She laughed through her tears and said, “Yes.”

“Are you staying somewhere safe?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He paused.

At that moment…. That small initiation by Sukanya made dissapper the 10,000 nautical miles distance which was there between that daughter and father.

Few tears rolled from his eyes.

After few seconds he said, “I heard your song on the radio yesterday.”

Sukanya pressed the phone closer to her ear.

“You did?”

“Yes. It was very good.”

Those four words were all she had wanted to hear for years.

She had received awards, applause, admiration, and professional recognition. Yet nothing had prepared her for the tenderness of hearing her father praise her again.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she whispered.

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He cleared his throat...

“You sang the song I taught you.”

Sukanya began crying again.

“I remembered you while singing it.”

There was another silence, but this time it did not feel like a wall.

It felt like two people standing on opposite sides of a closed door, both finally realizing that someone had reached for the handle.

They spoke for nearly an hour.

They did not settle every disagreement that night. Her father still worried about her work, and Sukanya still wanted him to trust her decisions. Neither pretended that the past three years had not happened.

But they listened.

For the first time since their argument, they tried to understand what the other had been feeling. Before ending the call, Sukanya said, “Daddy, I'm sorry I didn't call earlier.”

Her father was quiet for a moment and said, “I am sorry too, ma. I should have tried again.”

Sukanya wiped her tears.

“I should have tried too.”

It was not a grand reconciliation. No one made a dramatic speech. No music played in the background. There was only a daughter, a father, and a conversation that had been delayed for three years.

But sometimes, that is how a relationship begins to return. Not with a promise that everything will be perfect. With the courage to speak honestly, listen patiently, and begin again.

“Did that one phone call solve everything?” Vaasanthi asked.

“No,” Sukanya replied.

The answer came without hesitation.

“We had to rebuild our relationship. We had to talk about what had happened. I had to explain why his doubts had hurt me. He had to explain why he had been afraid. There were uncomfortable conversations. There were moments when old feelings returned. We had to learn how to disagree without disappearing from each other's lives.”

She smiled and said, “But the phone call gave us the opportunity to do those things.”

Vaasanthi looked at her carefully.

“Do you think you should always take the first step, even when you believe the other person was wrong?”

Sukanya considered the question.

“I don't think relationships should become competitions about who was right and who should apologise first. If we care about a bond, we should ask ourselves what matters more: proving that we were right, or finding out whether the relationship can still be saved.”

She paused.

“But I want to be clear about something. Taking the first step does not mean accepting every kind of behaviour. If someone repeatedly humiliates you, harms you, or refuses to respect your boundaries, you may need distance. You cannot rebuild a relationship entirely by yourself. The other person must also be willing to participate.”

Vaasanthi nodded slowly.

“Then what should a person do when the other person refuses to respond?”

“First, make an honest attempt. Speak clearly. Explain what the relationship means to you. Apologise if you have made a mistake. Ask to understand the other person's perspective. If you have something to forgive, consider whether you can do so. And if the other person is willing, work together to rebuild what was lost.”

“And if they still refuse?”

“Then you have to accept that you cannot make the decision for them.”

Sukanya's voice grew softer.

“But at least you will know that you did not let pride make the decision for you. You will know that you tried. You will not have to spend the rest of your life wondering whether one small conversation might have changed everything.”

Vaasanthi stopped writing. The words seemed to enter a place in her heart that she had kept closed for years.

You will not have to spend the rest of your life wondering.

She thought of the little girl who had watched her father from across the road.

What if she had run to him that day? What if she had asked him why he was standing there? What if she had been allowed to hear his voice, his explanation, his side of the story?

She had been a child. The responsibility had never been hers to carry. The adults in her life had made decisions, and she had grown up inside their consequences.

Yet she was no longer that little girl. She was an adult now. She could ask questions. She could listen. She could decide what she believed after hearing more than one side.

But could she do it? Could she reach toward the person she had spent fifteen years trying not to miss?

The thought frightened her.

She looked at Sukanya, who was waiting patiently for the next question.

“Do you regret not calling earlier?”

Sukanya did not answer immediately.

“Yes,” she said at last. “I regret the years we lost. I regret the birthdays when I did not hear his voice, the achievements I could not share with him, and the ordinary days when I would have liked to tell him something that mattered only because it mattered to me.”

Her eyes glistened.

“But I don't spend my time punishing myself for those years. I cannot recover them. What I can do is value the time we have now. I can call him without waiting for a special occasion. I can tell him I love him without feeling that I have lost an argument. And I can remember that a relationship is not a prize given to the person who waits the longest.”

She looked at Vaasanthi.

“Sometimes, the person who takes the first step is not admitting defeat. That person is deciding that the relationship deserves an opportunity.”

For several seconds, Vaasanthi could not find her next question.

Ravi, behind the camera, glanced at her. She took a breath and continued the interview.

But the interview had already moved beyond the questions she had prepared.

It had become a conversation about the years people lost while waiting for someone else to speak.

When the recording ended, Sukanya thanked the team.

She shook Vaasanthi's hand and said, “You asked some very thoughtful questions.”

“Your answers made them meaningful,” Vaasanthi replied.

Sukanya smiled.

“Perhaps you should remember one thing from this conversation. Don't let the people you love become strangers simply because neither of you knows how to begin.”

She said it casually, without knowing how deeply the words would remain with Vaasanthi.

Then she left the studio. Ravi began packing the equipment.

“Good interview,” he said. “You didn't rush her. You gave her time to think.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

“Ravi, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Have you ever stopped talking to someone because you were waiting for them to speak first?”

Ravi looked at her, surprised.

“Why? Are you planning to interview me next?”

“I'm serious.”

He leaned against the table.

“Yes,” he said. “Once. A close friend and I had an argument. Nothing very serious, but both of us felt insulted. I thought he should call me. He thought I should call him. Six months passed.”

“What happened?”

“One day, I needed some help with something and called him. We spoke normally within five minutes.”

“Just like that?”

“Not exactly. We were both awkward at first. But then he said something funny, I laughed, and the awkwardness disappeared. We never even discussed who had been right.”

Vaasanthi looked at him and asked, “Did you regret waiting six months?”

“Of course. But we were lucky. We found our way back before more time passed.”

Ravi studied her face.

“Why are you asking me all these questions?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “I was just thinking about the interview.”

He did not press her.

As they left the studio, Vaasanthi carried her notebook close to her chest. The pages were filled with Sukanya's words, but one sentence seemed to stand apart from everything else.

A relationship is not a prize given to the person who waits the longest.

She repeated it silently.

For years, she had believed that her father should have tried harder. He was the adult who had left the home, she had told herself. He was the one who should have found a way to return. She had been a child, and she had needed him.

That belief had not become false merely because she was now questioning it. She had indeed been a child. She had indeed missed her father. The years without him could not be erased by a single explanation.

But another question had begun to form. What had happened to him during those years? Had he stopped loving her? Had he forgotten her?

Or had he, like Sukanya's father, been standing on the other side of a silence, unsure whether he still had the right to speak?

Vaasanthi did not know. And for the first time, she wanted to know.

That evening, Radha was sitting in the living room when Vaasanthi returned home.

A television serial played softly in the background. Radha had placed a plate of cut fruit on the table and was sorting through some household bills.

“You're late today,” she said.

“The interview went longer than expected.”

“Who was it?”

“A singer. Sukanya Rao.”

Radha looked up.

“I have heard her songs. She sings beautifully.”

“She does.”

Vaasanthi sat down beside her mother.

For a few moments, they spoke about ordinary things. The rising cost of groceries. A neighbour's daughter's engagement. A leaking tap that needed repair.

Vaasanthi listened, but her mind kept returning to the interview. Finally, she said, “Amma, can I tell you something about today's programme?”

Radha folded the bill she was holding.

“Tell me.”

“The singer spoke about her father. They had stopped talking for three years after an argument. Both of them were waiting for the other person to call.”

Radha's hands became still.

“And then?”

“She called him. They spoke, and slowly they started rebuilding their relationship.”

Radha looked back at the television.

“Good for them,” she said.

Vaasanthi waited.

Then she asked, as gently as she could, “Amma, do you think sometimes people wait too long for someone else to take the first step?”

Radha did not answer immediately.

“Sometimes waiting is necessary,” she said. “People cannot keep going back to the same place and getting hurt.”

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“I understand.”

“Do you?”

Vaasanthi heard the firmness in her mother's voice.

“I think I am trying to.”

Radha turned to her.

“What exactly are you trying to understand, Vaasanthi?”

Vaasanthi could have asked the question then.

She could have said, *Amma, what happened between you and Daddy?*

She could have asked why Kishan had stood beneath the rain tree, why he had come to their home over the years, why Radha had never allowed her to speak to him.

She could have told her mother that she was beginning to feel the weight of a story she had never been permitted to question.

But she looked at Radha's face and saw the old hurt settle into it.

She was afraid of reopening wounds she did not yet understand.

So she said, “Nothing, Amma. I was only thinking about the interview.”

Radha studied her for a moment, then returned to the bills.

Vaasanthi stood up and went to her room.

She closed the door and sat beside the window.

Outside, the evening was settling over the neighbourhood. A father walked home with his young daughter, holding her schoolbag in one hand and her fingers in the other. The little girl was talking excitedly, and the man bent his head to listen.

Vaasanthi watched them until they disappeared around the corner.

Then she opened the drawer beside her bed.

The old photograph was still there.

She took it out carefully.

In the photograph, she was five years old, sitting on Kishan's shoulders. Her hands rested on his head, and her face was bright with the kind of happiness that children do not know how to hide.

She ran her fingers over the photograph.

“Daddy,” she whispered.

This time, the word did not sound like an accusation.

It sounded like a question.

She did not know whether Kishan was waiting for her. She did not know what he would say if she called him.

She did not know whether his explanation would change anything, or whether hearing it would hurt even more.

But she knew something she had not known before.

She had spent fifteen years living with questions she had never been allowed to ask.

And perhaps, one day, she would need to find the courage to ask them.

Vaasanthi placed the photograph beside her pillow instead of returning it to the drawer.

It was a small decision. No one else would have noticed it.

But for the first time in fifteen years, she had allowed her father to remain in the room with her—not as the villain of a story, not as a stranger whose name she avoided, but as a person whose side of the story she had never heard.

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She switched off the light…. The room grew dark, but her mind remained awake.

Somewhere inside her, a door that had been closed for fifteen years had begun to open.

It had not opened completely. She was not ready to walk through it.

But she was no longer pretending that it did not exist.

And sometimes, before a person takes the first step, the heart must first find the courage to admit that there is a step to be taken.

Chapter 6 :

The photograph remained beside Vaasanthi's pillow for three consecutive nights.

Every night, she told herself she would put it back in the drawer the following morning.

Every morning, she left it where it was.

It was a small thing, hardly worth noticing. Yet, for Vaasanthi, who had spent years putting away anything that reminded her of her father, leaving the photograph outside the drawer felt almost like a rebellion.

Not against her mother. Not against the past.

Against the version of herself she had carefully constructed—the girl who had convinced herself that she no longer needed what she had once desperately wanted.

On the fourth morning, she woke up before her alarm.

The room was still dim. The ceiling fan turned lazily above her, and somewhere outside, a milk vendor called out to the houses along the street.

She turned her head towards the photograph.

Kishan was smiling….. Little Vaasanthi was laughing.

They looked like two people who had never imagined that one day they might become strangers.

She sat up and picked up the photograph.

“Why can't I remember the reason?” she whispered.

She could remember her father's shoulders, his hands lifting her into the air, the smell of his shirt when she rested her face against him. She could remember the way he used to buy her small packets of biscuits on his way home. She could remember running to the door when she heard his scooter.

But she could not remember the last happy day.

She could not remember the precise moment when everything had changed.

Perhaps because she had been too young to understand it. Perhaps because the adults around her had never explained it.

Or perhaps because, somewhere along the way, the painful ending had slowly replaced every happy beginning.

She placed the photograph on her study table and went to get ready for work.

Her heart had questions.....Her mind had warnings..... And Vaasanthi, as usual, stood between them.

At the office, she tried to concentrate on the day's assignments.

There were two local reports to complete, a traffic update to record, and a meeting about the weekend's programming schedule. She worked efficiently, as she always did, but her thoughts wandered whenever she had a free moment.

During lunch, she opened her phone and searched for Kishan's name.

She did not have his current number.

She knew that he had once worked for a private company, but she did not know where he worked now. She knew he had relatives in another part of the city, but she had never met them. Her father had existed in her life as a collection of fragments—stories she had heard, memories she could barely hold, and questions no one had answered.

She closed the search page.

What are you doing? her mind asked sharply.

Nothing, her heart replied.

You are looking for him.

I am only trying to understand.

Understand what? You have lived without him for fifteen years.

That doesn't mean I know what happened.

And what if you find out something you don't like?

Her heart fell silent.

That was the question her mind always asked whenever she came close to something emotionally important.

What if it hurts? What if it disappoints you? What if the truth is worse than the uncertainty?

Her mind had protected her for years by asking those questions. It had taught her not to expect phone calls, not to wait for promises, and not to believe that love alone could hold a relationship together.

It had helped her survive.

But now the same protection was beginning to feel like a prison.

For the first time, she wondered whether the mind, in trying to prevent future pain, sometimes prevented future happiness as well.

“Vaasanthi!”

She looked up.

Pradeep was standing beside her desk.

“Are you all right? I've called you twice.”

“Sorry, sir. I was thinking about something.”

“Think about it after work. I need you in the conference room in ten minutes.”

She put her phone away.

For the next few hours, she returned to the familiar world of assignments, schedules, scripts, and deadlines. Work gave her something her personal life could not: a clear task, a measurable result, and the satisfaction of knowing when something was finished.

But even while preparing for the next interview, she carried a question that had no deadline.

If I can listen to the life story of a stranger with patience, why am I afraid to listen to my own father's story?

She had no answer.

The next interview was scheduled for Friday.

The guest was Dr. Saroja Iyer, a respected social worker who had spent more than three decades working with families, women in distress, abandoned elderly people, and children caught between difficult family circumstances.

Her organisation had begun with a small room and a handful of volunteers. Over the years, it had grown into a network of support centres across several districts.

She was not a celebrity in the conventional sense. She had no film songs, international medals, or bestselling books to her name. Yet her work had touched thousands of lives.

Pradeep wanted the interview to focus on the human stories behind her work.

“People often talk about social service as if it is simply about giving money or providing food,” he told Vaasanthi. “But Dr. Saroja's work goes deeper. She deals with loneliness, family conflict, dignity, and the difficult decisions people make when life doesn't go according to plan.”

Vaasanthi read through the background material.

There were stories of women who had rebuilt their lives after abandonment, elderly people who had found companionship after losing their families, and children who had received educational support after difficult childhoods.

One sentence from Dr. Saroja's earlier speech caught her attention:

“We cannot promise people a life without pain. We can help them avoid the additional pain of believing that they must face everything alone.”

Vaasanthi underlined it.

She prepared questions about the organisation, its funding, its volunteers, and the challenges of social work.

Then she added one more question.

“When a relationship breaks, how does a person know whether to try to rebuild it or to walk away?”

She looked at the question for a long time before saving the document.

It was the question she had been trying to ask herself.

Perhaps it was easier to ask it through someone else's story.

Dr. Saroja arrived at the studio with a small handbag and a folder of documents.

She was in her late sixties, with silver hair neatly tied back and a calmness that seemed to come from years of listening to people without rushing to judge them.

She greeted everyone warmly.

During the introductory conversation, Vaasanthi asked about her journey into social work.

“I did not begin with a grand mission,” Dr. Saroja said. “I began by noticing that people around me were struggling with things they were ashamed to discuss. A widow who could not afford her medicines. A girl who had stopped going to school because her family could not pay the fees. An old man who lived alone and had no one to speak to for days.”

“What made you decide to help them?”

“At first, I thought I was helping them because I had something they needed. Later, I realised that sometimes what people need most is not something we can give them. They need someone who will sit beside them and listen without making them feel small.”

The interview progressed smoothly.

Dr. Saroja spoke about the importance of financial independence, community support, education, and emotional dignity. She described how her organization trained volunteers to listen before offering advice.

“People who are hurting often receive too many instructions,” she said. “Everyone tells them what they should do. Very few people ask what they have already endured.”

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

She had often been told what to believe about her father.BShe could not remember anyone asking what she herself had felt when she missed him.

When the conversation reached the final section, she glanced at her prepared questions.

Then she looked at Dr. Saroja.

“Ma'am, may I ask you something slightly different?”

“Of course.”

“When a relationship breaks, how does a person know whether to try to rebuild it or to walk away?”

Dr. Saroja did not answer immediately.

She seemed to consider not only the question but also the person asking it.

“First, we must understand what broke the relationship,” she said. “Was there a misunderstanding? Was there a disagreement that grew larger because nobody was willing to listen? Was there a mistake that someone is willing to acknowledge? Or was there repeated cruelty, manipulation, or harm?”

“So the answer depends on the reason?”

“Very much. We should not tell everyone to return to every relationship. Sometimes distance is necessary. Sometimes a person needs protection more than reconciliation. But there are also relationships that break because two people become so determined to defend their positions that they forget the value of the bond itself.”

She folded her hands on her lap.

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“In those situations, a sincere conversation can change a great deal.”

Vaasanthi felt something tighten inside her.

“What if one person believes the other person should take the first step?”

Dr. Saroja smiled gently.

“That happens frequently. One person says, 'They hurt me, so they must come to me.' The other says exactly the same thing. Both may be hurt. Both may believe they are justified. And both may be waiting for the other to prove that the relationship matters.”

“What happens then?”

“Nothing happens. That is the problem.”

Dr. Saroja's answer was simple.

“Days pass. Then months. Sometimes years. The original argument becomes less important, but the silence becomes a habit. Eventually, people stop remembering exactly what they were fighting about. They only remember that the other person did not come.”

Vaasanthi lowered her eyes.

She thought of the fifteen years that had passed between her parents.

Fifteen years.....An entire childhood.

School examinations, birthdays, college admissions, her first job, her first salary, her first successful interview.

Fifteen years of moments that could never be returned to their original owners.

“Ma'am,” she continued, “if one person takes the first step, doesn't that mean they are accepting that they were wrong?”

Dr. Saroja shook her head.

“No. It means they are willing to open a conversation. There is a difference between saying, 'I was wrong about everything,' and saying, 'This relationship matters enough for me to try to understand what happened.'”

She paused.

“Taking the first step is not a declaration of defeat. It is an invitation.”

Vaasanthi felt the words settle into her mind.

An invitation.....Not surrender.

Not humiliation.....Not an admission that the other person had been right all along.

An invitation to speak……An invitation to listen.

An invitation to discover whether something that had been damaged could still be repaired.

“What if the other person refuses the invitation?” Vaasanthi asked.

“Then the person who reached out must respect that decision. One person cannot carry an entire relationship. We can offer an opportunity, but we cannot force someone to accept it.”

“Would you still consider the attempt worthwhile?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Saroja's answer was firm.

“Because the purpose of taking the first step is not to control the other person's response. It is to make an honest effort to do what is within your power. If they respond, you can begin rebuilding together. If they refuse, you may still grieve the loss, but you need not spend your life wondering whether you could have tried.”

Vaasanthi could hear the blood rushing in her ears. She wanted to ask another question.

She wanted to tell Dr. Saroja about the girl who had waited beneath the shadow of a broken family, about the father whose side of the story she had never heard, and about the mother who had carried her own pain so tightly that no other perspective had been allowed inside it.

But the camera was recording a public interview, not a private confession.

So she asked, “Do you think people sometimes confuse protecting their self-respect with protecting their ego?”

Dr. Saroja smiled.

“That is a very important question.”

She leaned forward slightly.

“Self-respect means knowing that you deserve to be treated with dignity. Ego, in the context of a disagreement, can sometimes make us feel that initiating a conversation would reduce our worth. We imagine that if we call first, apologise first, or ask first, we have somehow become smaller.”

“Have we?”

“Not necessarily. In fact, it can take considerable strength to approach someone when we are afraid of being rejected. But we must also be honest with ourselves. If we have made a mistake, we should acknowledge it. If

the other person has made a mistake, we can explain how it affected us. A healthy relationship makes room for both truths."

She paused before adding, "And if the other person refuses to hear us, we must remember that their refusal does not determine our worth."

Vaasanthi's pen remained motionless.

Both truths.

She had lived for years with one truth: her mother had been hurt, and her father was absent. But perhaps there were other truths.

Perhaps Kishan had hurt Radha and had also been hurt himself.

Perhaps Radha had felt abandoned and had also, in her determination to protect herself, closed a door that her daughter had wanted to walk through.

Perhaps Vaasanthi had been a victim of circumstances without either parent fully understanding what those circumstances would cost her.

None of these possibilities erased the pain she had experienced. But they made the story larger. And a larger story demanded a more careful judgment.

After the interview, Dr. Saroja remained in the studio while the production team arranged the next programme.

Vaasanthi approached her with a glass of water.

"Ma'am, thank you. That was a very meaningful conversation."

"I'm glad you found it useful."

"I wanted to ask you something after the cameras stopped."

Dr. Saroja looked at her kindly.

"Go ahead."

Vaasanthi hesitated.

Her mind began its familiar protest.

Don't do this. You don't know this woman. You are a journalist, not someone seeking personal advice. What if she misunderstands you? What if you say something you cannot take back?

Her heart answered quietly.

You don't have to tell her everything. Just ask the question.

Vaasanthi took a breath.

“If someone has spent many years believing that a relationship is over, but suddenly begins to wonder whether they understood the whole story, should they try to find out the truth?”

Dr. Saroja studied her for a moment.

“Is the person asking this question you?”

Vaasanthi gave a small, embarrassed smile.

“Perhaps.”

“Then I would say this: if it is safe to do so, and if knowing the truth matters to you, don't let fear make the decision on your behalf.”

“What if the truth hurts?”

“It may.”

“What if it changes the way I see someone?”

“It may do that too.”

Dr. Saroja's voice remained gentle.

“But not knowing can also hurt. Sometimes, we spend so much energy protecting ourselves from a possible disappointment that we never discover whether something good was still possible.”

Vaasanthi swallowed.

“How do we find the courage?”

“Don't demand that you become fearless. That is too much to ask of anyone. Begin by accepting that you are afraid. Then ask yourself whether the question matters enough to justify one small step.”

“One small step,” Vaasanthi repeated.

“Yes. You don't have to solve fifteen years in one afternoon. You don't have to promise anyone forgiveness before you understand what happened. You don't even have to know what the relationship will look like at the end. Begin with the truth. Listen. Then decide.”

Dr. Saroja placed a reassuring hand on Vaasanthi's arm.

“And remember, listening to someone's side of a story does not mean you must agree with everything they say. Understanding is not the same as surrendering your judgment.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

For the first time, the possibility of hearing her father's story seemed less like a betrayal of her mother and more like a necessary part of understanding her own life.

She thanked Dr. Saroja.

As the older woman walked towards the exit, Vaasanthi remained where she was, looking at the studio floor.

She had entered the interview with a question about broken relationships.

She was leaving with a question about herself.

That night, Vaasanthi found herself unable to sleep.

She lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, while the two familiar voices began their argument again.

Her mind spoke first.

You have a life now. You have a career. You have begun to build something for yourself. Why disturb everything?

Her heart answered.

Because something inside me has remained unfinished.

You don't know what he will say.

I know.

You don't know whether he will blame your mother.

I know.

You don't know whether he will ask you to choose between them.

I know.

Then why do you want to do this?

Her heart took a moment before answering.

Because I want to know who my father is beyond the story I was told.

Her mind had no immediate response. It returned with another question.

And what if you discover that he was wrong?

Then I will know.

What if your mother was right?

Then I will know that too.

What if nothing changes?

Vaasanthi closed her eyes.

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At least I will no longer be living entirely on assumptions.

The room became quiet.

She realised that her heart was not asking her to reject her mother. It was not asking her to excuse her father. It was not asking her to erase fifteen years of hurt.

It was asking for the opportunity to understand.

For years, Vaasanthi had thought that emotional strength meant never allowing her heart to influence her decisions. She had treated emotion as a weakness that needed constant supervision.

But perhaps strength was not the absence of emotion.

Perhaps it was the ability to listen to emotion without allowing it to make every decision.

Her heart could remind her that she had missed her father. Her mind could remind her that she had been hurt by his absence.

Her heart could ask for answers. Her mind could insist that she protect herself.

Neither had to be silenced. She needed both. She turned towards the study table.

The photograph was still there. She picked it up and looked at Kishan's smiling face.

“Daddy,” she whispered, “I don't know what happened between you and Amma.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“I don't know why you couldn't come back. I don't know why you stopped being part of my life. I don't know whether you tried enough or whether you gave up.”

She paused, trying to steady her breathing.

“But I want to know.”

She placed the photograph back on the table. Then she opened her phone. She searched again for Kishan's name, but there was still no number she could call.

She looked at the screen for several minutes before closing it. Not tonight, she decided. She was not yet ready to make the call. But something had changed.

Until recently, she had believed that searching for her father would mean betraying her mother.

Now she understood that the truth did not have to belong to only one person. She could love her mother and still ask questions.

She could acknowledge her father's absence and still want to hear his explanation. She could feel angry about the years she had lost and still wonder whether the years ahead might be different.

Her heart and mind did not agree on what she should do next. But, for the first time, they had begun to agree on one thing. She could not remain where she was forever.

Over the next few weeks, Vaasanthi's professional life continued to grow.

The interview with Dr. Saroja received a strong response from viewers. Several people wrote to the channel describing their own experiences with broken friendships, family disagreements, and long periods of silence.

One message came from a man who had not spoken to his younger brother for eight years.

Another came from a woman who had lost contact with a childhood friend after a minor misunderstanding.

A third was from a young man who said he had been waiting for his father to apologise for something that had happened when he was a teenager.

The messages were different, but many carried the same question.

Should I reach out first?

Vaasanthi read them during her lunch break.

She could not answer for any of those people. She did not know their complete circumstances, and she understood that reconciliation was not always the right choice.

But she hoped each of them would examine the difference between a relationship that needed a boundary and a relationship that had simply become trapped in silence.

She began to see how frequently people allowed a single moment to determine the future of a bond.

A harsh sentence…..A missed call….An apology that never came…A message typed but not sent.

A door that remained closed because both people were waiting for the other to knock.

The events themselves were sometimes small. The consequences were not.

At work, Pradeep noticed the change in her interviews. She was no longer interested only in achievements and turning points. She wanted to understand the private decisions that had shaped the people sitting before her.

“You are becoming a different kind of interviewer,” he told her one afternoon.

“Is that good or bad, sir?”

“Good, I think. You are learning to look beyond the headline.”

He paused.

“Just remember that every person has a life outside the story they tell you. We can listen carefully, but we must never assume we know everything about them.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“I will remember that.”

She returned to her desk and opened the next assignment.

There were more people to meet, more stories to hear, and more lessons waiting in lives very different from her own.

Yet, beneath all those assignments, one unfinished conversation continued to wait.

The conversation with Kishan, the conversation with her own dad, She did not know when it would happen.

She did not know who would take the first step. But she had stopped telling herself that the question no longer mattered. And that, in its own quiet way, was progress.

Because before a person can rebuild a broken bond, they must first accept that the bond still means something to them.

Vaasanthi had spent fifteen years denying that truth. Now she was slowly learning to face it.

Chapter 7:

There are moments in life when a person begins to change without announcing it to the world.

No one notices a difference in the way they walk, the way they speak, or the way they carry out their responsibilities. They continue to laugh at familiar jokes, complain about traffic, finish their work, and return home at the usual hour.

Yet, inside them, something has shifted.

A question that once seemed unnecessary begins to feel important. A memory that once caused only pain begins to invite curiosity. A door that was firmly closed begins to look as though it might still open.

Vaasanthi was experiencing that kind of change.

She had not called her father. She had not asked her mother any more questions. She had not made any decision about what she would do next.

But she had stopped trying to convince herself that the past did not matter.

And sometimes, that is where change begins.

On a Thursday morning, she arrived at the news channel office to find Pradeep waiting beside her desk.

“Vaasanthi, I have something interesting for you.”

She put down her handbag.

“Another interview, sir?”

“Of course. What else would I give you? A holiday?”

She laughed.

“I'm willing to accept both, sir.”

“Complete the interview first. Then we will discuss your holiday.”

He handed her a file.

The name on the cover was familiar: **SUDHAKAR KRISHNA— Music Composer.**

Sudhakar Krishna is one of the most respected music composers in the Indian film industry. His career spanned nearly three decades, and his compositions had become part of countless people's memories. His songs had played at weddings, accompanied long journeys, comforted people during difficult times, and filled the homes of families celebrating festivals.

He had won awards, worked with leading singers, and composed music for films in several Indian languages.

But what interested Vaasanthi most was something she discovered in an old interview.

Sudhakar had once spent six years trying to enter the film industry without success. Six years of rejection.

Six years of small jobs, temporary assignments, and compositions that nobody wanted to hear.

And then, one day, everything had changed.

She looked up from the file.

“Sir, has he agreed to discuss his early struggles?”

“He has. He has also agreed to speak about the people who helped him along the way.”

Pradeep smiled.

“Don't make this an interview about awards and achievements. Find out what happened during those six years. Success is interesting, but the journey that produces it is usually much more revealing.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

She had begun to understand what her editor meant.

People often remembered the moment a person succeeded. Very few remembered the years during which that person had nearly given up.

Perhaps the same was true of relationships.

People remembered the day two people stopped speaking.

They rarely understood the small disappointments, unspoken fears, misunderstood intentions, and unasked questions that had brought them to that day.

Vaasanthi opened her notebook.

At the top of a fresh page, she wrote: **What keeps a person going when nobody believes in them?**

She looked at the question for a moment. Then, beneath it, she added another.

Who is the person we never thank enough?

Sudhakar Krishna arrived at the studio carrying no entourage, no assistant, and no visible impatience.

He was in his late fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair and a thoughtful expression. He wore a simple cream-coloured kurta and carried a small leather folder. When Vaasanthi greeted him, he smiled warmly.

“I have watched some of your interviews,” he said. “You ask questions that make people think.”

“I hope they make people think in the right direction, sir.”

“That is a good ambition. Though I suspect the best questions are the ones that make the interviewer think as well.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

They took their seats, and the recording began.



She started with his childhood, his early interest in music, and the years he had spent learning composition.

Sudhakar spoke about growing up in a modest household where music was a passion rather than a profession.

His father wanted him to pursue a stable career, while his mother quietly encouraged his interest.

He studied music, worked as an assistant to a few composers, and spent long hours arranging instruments, correcting notation, and preparing recordings for people whose names would eventually appear on film posters.

For six years, he tried to get his own opportunity. For six years, the answer was almost always the same.

Not now.

We already have someone.

Your music is good, but we need something different. Come back next year.

“Did you ever think of giving up?” Vaasanthi asked.

“Many times.”

“What stopped you?”

Sudhakar smiled faintly.

“Initially, ambition. Then stubbornness. Later, responsibility. And somewhere in between, one person who refused to let me believe that rejection was the final answer.”

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“Who was that?”

“My friend, Suresh.”

He leaned back in his chair, and his expression softened.

“Suresh and I met when we were both struggling musicians. He was an extraordinary keyboard player. He could hear a melody once and reproduce it almost perfectly. I was better at creating arrangements, but he had an instinct for music that I admired enormously.”

“Were you working together?”

“For several years. We worked on small advertisements, background arrangements, and demonstration tracks for composers. Sometimes we were paid very little. Sometimes we were not paid at all. We shared meals, rented a small room together for a while, and spent nights discussing the music we wanted to create.”

He laughed.

“We were very ambitious. We believed that if we worked hard enough, the world would eventually notice us.”

“Did it?”

“Eventually. But not in the way we expected.”

One afternoon, Sudhakar received an opportunity to compose the background score for a small film.

It was not a major production. The budget was limited, the director was relatively unknown, and nobody expected the film to become a commercial success.

But for Sudhakar, it was the first real chance to prove himself.

He worked for weeks on the music.

Suresh helped him with arrangements and recordings. They spent long nights in the studio, trying different

combinations of instruments until the music matched the emotions of each scene.

When the film was released, it received modest attention. The songs did not become chartbusters, but several critics praised the background score.

More importantly, a well-known producer noticed Sudhakar's work and offered him an opportunity to compose music for a larger project.

Sudhakar was overjoyed.

He and Suresh celebrated at a small restaurant, sharing a meal they could barely afford a few months earlier.

“This is the beginning,” Suresh told him.

Sudhakar remembered those words even years later.

“This is the beginning.”

For the next project, the producer wanted Sudhakar to work with a different team. The schedule was demanding, and the studio insisted that he be available throughout the day.

Suresh was not included in the new arrangement.

Initially, Sudhakar tried to negotiate. He asked whether his friend could be brought on board as an arranger.

The producer refused.

“We need to move quickly,” he said. “I have already arranged the team. You focus on composing.”

Sudhakar was disappointed, but he was also afraid.

He had waited six years for an opportunity. He did not want to risk losing it before his career had properly begun.

He told himself that he would work with Suresh again after this project. He promised his friend that nothing would change between them. But things did change.

Sudhakar became busy. He attended meetings, travelled for recordings, and worked long hours. Calls went unanswered. Messages received brief replies. Plans were postponed.

Suresh tried to remain supportive, but he could not hide his disappointment.

One evening, he confronted Sudhakar. “You have changed.”

Sudhakar was exhausted after a long recording session.

“I'm working, Suresh. What do you expect me to do? I cannot spend every evening sitting with you.”

“I never asked you to do that. I only expected you to remember how we got here.”

“I remember everything. Don't speak as if I owe my entire career to you.”

The words came out more harshly than he intended.

Suresh stared at him and said, “I didn't say you owed me your career.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“That you have become so afraid of losing your opportunity that you are willing to lose the people who stood beside you before it arrived.”

Sudhakar felt the sting of the accusation.

Instead of considering whether there was truth in it, he defended himself.

“You don't understand the pressure I'm under.”

“Perhaps I don't.”

Suresh picked up his bag.

“But I understand that I cannot keep waiting for the friend I used to know.”

He left.

Sudhakar watched him go.

He was angry, but beneath the anger was something more uncomfortable: the possibility that Suresh had said something he needed to hear.

He pushed that thought aside.

He had a recording the next morning. He had a producer waiting for him. He had spent six years trying to get here.

He could not afford distractions. He told himself that Suresh would eventually understand.

Suresh told himself that Sudhakar would eventually remember.

Neither man called.

The interview paused briefly while the production team adjusted the camera.

Vaasanthi looked at Sudhakar.

“Did you try to contact him later?”

Sudhakar gave a slow nod.

“Once. About three months after the argument.”

“What happened?”

“I called his number. It rang, but he did not answer. I was standing outside the studio, surrounded by people, and I felt embarrassed. I thought he was deliberately ignoring me.”

“Did you try again?”

“No.”

He looked at her honestly.

“I wish I could tell you that I had a very good reason. But I didn't. I was proud. I was hurt. And I was successful enough by then to convince myself that I did not need to keep looking back.”

“What about Suresh?”

“I don't know what he was thinking. Perhaps he was waiting for me to try again. Perhaps he had decided that he was done with the friendship. I never gave him the opportunity to tell me.”

Vaasanthi looked down at her notes.

There it was again.One person had made an assumption. The other person had never been asked to explain.

And time had been allowed to turn uncertainty into a permanent distance.

“What happened after that?” she asked.

“Life continued. My career grew. I composed more songs. I worked with wonderful singers and musicians. I received awards. My family was proud of me.”

He paused.

“But there was always something missing from those early years of success. Every time something good happened, I would remember the people who had been with me when nothing was happening. I would remember that little room where Suresh and I had worked together. I would remember the meals we had shared, the music we had created, and the dreams we had discussed.”

“Did you ever meet him again?”

Sudhakar looked towards the camera, then back at Vaasanthi.

“Yes. After nearly twelve years.”

The meeting happened unexpectedly at a music festival.

Sudhakar had been invited to speak on a panel about the evolution of film music. As he entered the auditorium, he noticed a man standing near the stage, speaking to one of the organisers.

The man had grey hair now.

His shoulders were slightly broader, and his face had changed with age.

But Sudhakar recognised him immediately.

Suresh.

For a moment, he considered turning away.

He wondered whether his friend would greet him. He wondered whether he should approach him. He wondered whether Suresh would be angry.

Then Suresh turned.

Their eyes met.

Neither man moved for several seconds.Finally, Suresh smiled politely and walked towards him.

“Sudhakar. Congratulations. I have been following your work.”

Sudhakar felt a strange ache in his chest.

He had imagined this meeting many times. In some versions, Suresh was angry. In others, Sudhakar explained everything. Sometimes, he imagined himself apologising. Sometimes, he imagined Suresh doing so.

But in reality, they stood before each other like two acquaintances who had once shared a much closer life.

“Thank you,” Sudhakar replied. “How are you?”

“I'm well.”

They exchanged a few ordinary words.

Suresh had started teaching music. He had a family and a small studio of his own. He was doing well, though he had never pursued the kind of public career they had once imagined together.

An organiser called Suresh away.

“Good to see you,” Suresh said.

“You too.”

Then he left.

Sudhakar watched him walk across the hall.

He had spent twelve years imagining what he would say if he ever saw his friend again.

When the opportunity arrived, he had said almost nothing.

That evening, he sat alone in his hotel room.

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He realised that he had not lost his friend in a single argument. He had lost him through a series of small decisions—choosing not to call, choosing not to explain, choosing to assume that time would repair what neither of them was willing to address.

He had blamed Suresh for not reaching out.

For the first time, he considered that Suresh might have been telling himself the same story.

Two people.

Two versions of the same hurt.

Twelve years of silence.

And one conversation that had lasted less than five minutes.

“What did you do after the festival?” Vaasanthi asked.

Sudhakar smiled faintly.

“I called him.”

“This time?”

“This time, I called again when he didn't answer.”

Vaasanthi smiled too.

“And the second time?”

“He answered.”

Sudhakar looked down at his hands.

“I told him that I had been thinking about our friendship. I told him I was sorry for the way I had spoken to him. I explained that I had been frightened of losing my opportunity and had handled that fear badly.”

“Did he accept your apology?”

“He listened. Then he told me something I had never considered.”

Sudhakar paused.

“He said that when I became successful, he was genuinely happy for me. He had never wanted me to fail. He had only wanted to know whether our friendship still mattered to me.”

Vaasanthi felt her throat tighten.

“What did you say?”

“I told him that it had always mattered. I had simply behaved as though I could postpone the friendship until I had more time.”

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He gave a quiet laugh.

“I had thought success would give me more freedom. Instead, I had used my lack of time as an excuse to avoid a difficult conversation.”

“Did you become close again?”

“Not immediately. Twelve years is a long time. We had missed birthdays, family occasions, and countless ordinary conversations. We could not pretend that a single phone call had returned everything to the way it had been.”

He looked up.

“But we began again. We met for coffee. We spoke about our families. We remembered old days. Sometimes we talked about the argument, and sometimes we didn't. Gradually, we stopped behaving like two men who had to be careful around each other.”

“Are you still in touch?”

“Yes. We speak regularly now. He visits my studio when he is in the city. Sometimes he plays the keyboard while I work on a composition.”

Sudhakar smiled.

“And occasionally, he still tells me that I am getting too carried away with myself.”

Vaasanthi laughed.

“Some friendships are valuable precisely because they don't allow us to become too impressed with ourselves.”

“Exactly.”

He paused.

“And I am grateful that we got another opportunity. I cannot pretend that I didn't contribute to the distance between us. I did. I waited for him to make things easy for me, even though I was the one who had hurt him with my words.”

He looked directly at Vaasanthi.

“Eventually, I understood that if I wanted the friendship to survive, I had to stop treating the first step as something beneath me.”

When the interview ended, Sudhakar remained seated for a moment.

“May I tell you something that I didn't mention during the recording?” he asked.

“Certainly, sir.”

“After Suresh and I reconciled, I composed a song for a film about two childhood friends who lose contact and meet again years later. The director wanted something emotional, but not tragic.”

“Did you write the lyrics too?”

“No. A lyricist wrote them. But I composed the melody from a phrase Suresh and I used to play when we were young.”

He smiled at the memory.

“The song was about unfinished things. Unfinished conversations, unfinished promises, unfinished dreams. It became quite popular.”

“Did Suresh hear it?”

“Yes. I sent him the recording before the film was released.”

“What did he say?”

Sudhakar laughed.

“He called me and said, 'You have finally made a good composition. It only took you twenty years.'”

Vaasanthi laughed with him.

Then Sudhakar's expression softened.

“But after that, he said something I will never forget. He told me that he was glad I had called him. He said he had sometimes wondered whether our friendship would ever return.”

He paused.

“He had wondered. I had wondered. And both of us had wasted years wondering when we could have simply spoken.”

Vaasanthi looked at him.

“Sir, do you think you would have called him if you hadn't met him at the festival?”

Sudhakar considered the question carefully.

“I would like to say yes. But I don't know.”

“Why?”

“Because I had already spent twelve years telling myself that I would call someday. Someday is a very comfortable word. It lets us feel that we intend to do something without requiring us to do it today.”

He smiled sadly.

“I had become very good at postponing the things that frightened me.”

The words stayed with Vaasanthi.

Someday.

She had used that word too.

Someday, she would ask her mother about the separation.

Someday, she would learn more about her father.

Someday, she would decide whether to reach out.

Someday, she would find the courage.

But someday had no date on a calendar.

And every day that passed became another day she could never recover.

She thanked Sudhakar for the interview.

As he stood to leave, he turned back towards her.

“I hope you remember something from my story.”

“What is it, sir?”

“Don't wait until you are certain that the other person will respond. If you wait for certainty, you may wait forever. Reach out when you have a sincere reason to do so. Then let the other person decide what they want to do with the opportunity.”

He smiled.

“And if the relationship matters, don't assume that the person who has been silent has stopped caring. Sometimes they have. Sometimes they haven't. You will never know which it is until you have a conversation.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

She watched him leave the studio.

Then she looked at the empty chair where he had been sitting.

For a moment, she imagined her father sitting there instead.

She imagined asking him the questions she had carried for fifteen years.

She imagined hearing his voice.

She imagined discovering that the truth was complicated.

And then she imagined walking away from the conversation without knowing what he had wanted to tell her.

That last thought frightened her most.

Not because she was certain she would regret it.

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Because she was beginning to understand that she might.

That evening, Vaasanthi reached home and found Radha arranging flowers in a small vase.

“Amma, I interviewed a music composer today,” she said.

“Was he famous?”

“Very famous.”

“What did you ask him?”

Vaasanthi hesitated.

Then she said, “I asked him about a friendship he had lost.”

Radha's hands slowed.

“A friendship?”

“Yes. He and his friend had a misunderstanding. Both of them waited for the other person to call. Twelve years passed before they finally spoke again.”

Radha continued arranging the flowers, but she was no longer looking at them.

“What happened when they met?”

“They started talking again. Slowly, they rebuilt the friendship.”

Radha placed the vase on the table.

“Not every relationship can be rebuilt, Vaasanthi.”

“I know, Amma.”

“Sometimes people have reasons for keeping their distance.”

“I know that too.”

Radha looked at her daughter.

“Then why do you keep bringing up these stories?”

The question was not loud, but Vaasanthi could hear the concern beneath it.

For a moment, she considered saying everything.

She wanted to tell Radha that the interviews had changed the way she looked at the past. She wanted to say that she was no longer satisfied with knowing only that her parents had separated. She wanted to ask why she had never been allowed to hear her father's voice, even once, without feeling that she was doing something wrong.

But she saw the tension in her mother's face and stopped herself.

She was not ready for the conversation. And perhaps Radha was not ready either.

“Because they make me think, Amma,” she answered honestly.

“About what?”

“About how people can spend years waiting for something that might have been possible if they had spoken earlier.”

Radha was silent.

Vaasanthi added, “I'm not saying that everyone should return to every relationship. I'm only saying that

sometimes people lose something important without ever finding out whether it could have been saved.”

Radha looked away.

“Life is not as simple as the stories you interview people about.”

“I know, Amma.”

“Do you?”

Vaasanthi nodded.

“I am beginning to understand that it is more complicated than I thought.”

For a long moment, Radha said nothing.

Then she picked up the vase and carried it towards the dining table.

“Your dinner is ready,” she said.

The conversation ended there.

But it did not disappear.

Vaasanthi could sense that her words had reached a place inside her mother that Radha was not prepared to discuss.

She did not push further.

For now, she had learned something important from her work: asking a question did not mean she was entitled to an immediate answer. Sometimes people needed time to face a truth they had avoided for years.

She went to her room.

The photograph was still on the study table.

She picked it up and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Daddy,” she whispered, “I wonder whether you are also waiting for someday.”

She had no way of knowing.

But she could no longer pretend that the question did not matter.

That night, she opened a fresh page in her notebook.

At the top, she wrote:

Things I Have Learned From Other People's Lives.

She began making a list.

A doctor's interview had taught her that silence could prevent people from receiving the help they needed.

An athlete had taught her that doubt did not always mean a lack of love.

A singer had taught her that waiting for someone to understand could become a way of losing precious time.

A social worker had taught her that taking the first step was an invitation, not a surrender.

And a music composer had taught her that even a successful life could contain an unfinished conversation.

Vaasanthi put down her pen.

She looked at the list and realised that she had been collecting lessons from other people's lives for weeks.

Each interview had given her something valuable.

Yet the most important lesson was becoming increasingly difficult to avoid.

Understanding a truth is not the same as having the courage to act on it.

She could interview a hundred people and learn a hundred lessons. She could explain the importance of listening, forgiveness, courage, and initiative to an audience. She could ask questions that made strangers reflect on their own relationships.

But one day, she would have to face her own question.

Would she continue waiting for the past to explain itself?

Or would she take the first step towards understanding it?

She did not know when she would be ready.

She only knew that the question had begun to follow her everywhere.

She closed the notebook and placed it beside the photograph.

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Outside, the neighbourhood had grown quiet. A few lights remained on in distant houses. Somewhere, a television played softly behind a closed window. Somewhere else, a phone might have been ringing unanswered.

And perhaps, in another home across the city, Kishan, her dad was sitting alone with his own memories.

Perhaps he remembered the little girl who had once run to the door when she heard his scooter.

Perhaps he remembered the years he had missed.

Perhaps he had also wondered what he would say if he ever had the opportunity to speak to his daughter again.

Vaasanthi could not know.

For fifteen years, she had lived with the assumption that her father belonged to the past.

Now, slowly, she was beginning to understand that the past was not always finished simply because people had stopped speaking about it.

Some things remained unfinished.

Some words remained unspoken.

Some relationships waited—not necessarily for a perfect apology, not necessarily for a grand reunion, but for one honest attempt to discover whether a connection still existed.

And sometimes, the first step was not a phone call or a visit.

Sometimes, it was the moment a person finally admitted to themselves:

This still matters to me.

Vaasanthi switched off the light.

The photograph remained beside her.

And the conversation she had not yet begun continued quietly in her heart.

Chapter 8:

There was a question Vaasanthi had begun to ask herself almost every night.

What if Daddy has been waiting too?

She never asked it aloud.

She was afraid of what the question might do to the story she had carried for fifteen years.

Until recently, she had believed that her father belonged to the past because he had chosen to leave it behind. Now, she was beginning to wonder whether he had been trying to return to a place where nobody was willing to let him in.

She did not know whether that was true.

And she did not want to replace one assumption with another.

Her father might have made mistakes. He might have failed to understand her mother. He might have allowed pride, anger, or helplessness to influence his decisions. He might even have been responsible for much of the pain that had followed.

She was not ready to defend him.

But she was no longer willing to condemn him without hearing him.

That distinction was becoming increasingly important to her.

One Monday morning, while travelling to work, Vaasanthi noticed an elderly man standing near a bus stop. He was holding a small paper bag in one hand and looking repeatedly at the road. A few feet away, a young woman was speaking impatiently on her phone.

The man looked at her and said something.

She shook her head and turned away.

He tried again.

This time, she raised her voice.

“Thatha, I told you I will call you later! Why are you asking me again and again?”

The old man lowered his eyes.

The young woman continued speaking on the phone as though nothing had happened.

Vaasanthi watched them through the bus window until the traffic moved forward and the scene disappeared.

She did not know their story. Perhaps the young woman was under pressure. Perhaps the old man had been asking the same question repeatedly. Perhaps there was a history between them that an outsider could never understand.

She refused to judge either of them.

Yet the sight stayed with her.

The old man's lowered eyes reminded her of something she could not quite name.

Perhaps it was the expression she imagined on her father's face whenever he had tried to contact her and had been refused.

She turned towards the window.

Why am I thinking about him everywhere? she asked herself.

Her mind answered immediately.

Because you are allowing yourself to think about him again.

Her heart added something else.

And because missing someone does not always disappear just because we stop talking about them.

Vaasanthi closed her eyes for a moment.

She had spent years believing that emotional distance was a sign of strength.

Now she was discovering that sometimes distance merely concealed what a person was not ready to face.

She opened her eyes as the bus approached her stop.

There was work to do.

And for the next several hours, work would have to be enough.

That afternoon, Pradeep called her into his cabin.

“I have an assignment for you,” he said.

Vaasanthi sat down.

“What is it, sir?”

“We are planning a special programme on people who have made a difference in their communities. I want you to interview a retired schoolteacher and a social activist who has spent nearly forty years teaching children in a small town.”

“Is she still teaching?”

“Not in a school. She retired three years ago, but she continues to teach children who cannot afford tuition.”

Pradeep opened a file.

“Her name is Lalitha Devi. She has helped hundreds of students complete their education. Some have become doctors, some teachers, some engineers. A few have returned to the same town and started helping the next generation.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“It is. But there is another part of her story.”

He turned a page.

“Lalitha Devi had a serious disagreement with her younger brother nearly twenty years ago. They stopped speaking. After many years, they reconciled. I want you to explore that part of her life, but with sensitivity. Her work is the main subject of the programme. We are not looking for sensational family drama.”

Vaasanthi looked at the file.

“Do we know why they stopped speaking?”

“Only what she has shared publicly. There was a disagreement over a family property and responsibility for their ageing mother. Both believed they were being treated unfairly.”

Pradeep closed the file.

“She is willing to discuss it, but don't push her if she becomes uncomfortable.

The important thing is to understand what she learned from the experience.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

She knew that the interview might touch something personal.

But she also knew that it was not her place to turn someone else's story into a way of avoiding her own questions.

She would listen....

She would ask.

And she would let Lalitha decide what she wanted to share.

Lalitha Devi arrived at the studio the following Wednesday.

She was seventy-one years old, with a gentle face and bright, attentive eyes.

She wore a pale green cotton saree and carried a cloth bag filled with old photographs, certificates, and notebooks.

When Vaasanthi greeted her, Lalitha smiled.

“I was told that you would be interviewing me. I hope I don't disappoint you.

I am only a retired teacher.”

Vaasanthi smiled back.

“Ma'am, a teacher who has helped hundreds of children build their lives is not 'only' anything.”

Lalitha laughed.

“You journalists know how to make people feel important.”

“Sometimes, ma'am, our job is simply to help people recognise the importance they have already created.”

Lalitha looked at her with interest.

“That is a good answer.”

They sat down, and the recording began.

Vaasanthi started asking questions.



Lalitha spoke about her childhood, her decision to become a teacher, and her early years working in a government school. She remembered children who came to class without breakfast, students who shared textbooks, and parents who had to choose between sending a child to school and asking that child to help earn money for the family.

She spoke about the satisfaction of seeing a struggling student understand a difficult lesson.

“I never had a great salary,” she said. “But I had the privilege of watching children discover what they were capable of. That is a reward no salary can fully measure.”

Vaasanthi asked about some of her former students.

Lalitha opened her bag and took out a photograph of a young woman wearing a white doctor's coat.

“This girl was the first in her family to complete college. Her father wanted her to stop studying after school because the family needed money. We spoke to him several times. He finally agreed to let her continue.”

She held the photograph carefully.

“She is a paediatrician now. Every year, she visits our town and conducts a free health camp for children.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“You must be very proud.”

“I am. But I tell her that she must not thank me too much. She did the hard work. I only helped her see a possibility.”

Lalitha placed the photograph back in her bag.

“Sometimes, people need someone to believe in them until they learn to believe in themselves.”

The sentence reminded Vaasanthi of Meera Krishnan, the athlete who had turned doubt into determination. It reminded her of Sukanya Rao and the song that had brought a father and daughter back into conversation. It reminded her of Sudhakar, who had finally called the friend he had missed for twelve years.

Everywhere she looked, people seemed to be teaching her the same lesson in different ways.

But she was not yet ready to accept that the lesson applied to her.

Not completely.

When the conversation turned to Lalitha's family, her expression changed.

“My younger brother, Mohan, and I were very close when we were children,” she said. “He was five years younger than me. Our father died when Mohan was still in school, and I took responsibility for helping him complete his education.”

“Were you like a second mother to him?”

“In some ways, yes. I helped him with his studies, attended his school meetings, and supported him when he began working. When I got married, he was the one who helped organise everything. We shared many responsibilities.”

“What changed?”

Lalitha folded her hands in her lap.

“Our mother grew older and began needing more care. Mohan lived in another town. I lived closer to her, so most of the responsibility fell on me. I did not mind helping Amma, but I felt that my brother should also share the responsibility.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“I did. But I did not tell him calmly.”

She smiled faintly at her own admission.

“I was tired. I was managing my job, my family, and our mother's needs. I felt that he was making excuses. He

felt that I did not understand the pressure of his work and the responsibilities he had towards his own family.”

“Were both of you under pressure?”

“Yes. But at that time, neither of us was interested in understanding the other's pressure. We were interested in proving that our own burden was greater.”

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

Lalitha continued.

“One day, we argued over some money that had been spent on our mother's medical care. I told him that he had forgotten everything I had done for him. He replied that I was using the past to make him feel guilty.”

She paused.

“Those words hurt me deeply. I had never thought of my support as something I could use against him. I believed I was simply reminding him of his responsibilities.”

“What happened after that?”

“I told him that if he felt I was such a burden, he did not need to visit us anymore.”

Vaasanthi felt the room grow still.

“Did you mean it?”

Lalitha looked at her.

“At that moment, yes. I wanted him to feel the hurt I was feeling.”

She paused again.

“Later, I realised that I had spoken out of anger. But by then, he had left. I expected him to call and apologise. He expected me to call and take back my words.”

“And neither of you did?”

“Neither of us did.”

Lalitha looked down.

“Months passed. Then a year. Our mother occasionally asked about him, and I would tell her that he was busy. She knew we were not speaking, but she never forced us to reconcile.”

“Did you miss him?”

Lalitha smiled sadly.

“Every day.”

The answer was so immediate that Vaasanthi felt a sudden ache in her chest.

“Then why didn't you call him?”

Lalitha did not look away.

“Because I believed that if I called first, I would be accepting that I was the one who had been wrong.”

She paused.

“And because I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“That he might not answer. That he might speak harshly to me. That he might tell me he no longer wanted a relationship with me. As long as I did not call, I could tell myself that we were separated because of the argument. If I called and he rejected me, I would have to face something much more painful.”

Vaasanthi's pen remained still.

She understood that fear.

She had not called her father for the same reason. She was afraid that he might reject her, blame her mother, or reveal something that would disturb everything she believed.

But she had never considered that her father might also be afraid.

She did not know whether he was.

She could not assume it.

Still, she was beginning to understand that fear could prevent a person from reaching out just as effectively as anger could.

Lalitha continued her story.

Two years after the argument, her mother passed away.

Mohan came for the funeral.

He stood among the relatives, accepted condolences, and helped arrange the final rituals. Lalitha saw him several times, but neither sibling knew how to begin a conversation.

They spoke when necessary.

They stood together when the family required them to.

But when the ceremonies ended, Mohan left without saying anything more.

Lalitha watched him walk towards the gate.

She wanted to call out to him.

She wanted to ask him to stay for a while.

She wanted to tell him that their mother had asked about him during her final weeks, even when she was too weak to speak much.

But the words did not come.

She told herself that he could have approached her.

He told himself that she could have approached him. And the silence continued.

Years passed.

Lalitha retired from teaching. Her children grew up and moved to different cities. She continued her volunteer work, helping children from disadvantaged families.

Her life was full of activity.

Yet certain days were difficult.

During festivals, she remembered the days when Mohan had visited her home with sweets. During family celebrations, she remembered how he used to make everyone laugh. When she found old photographs, she sometimes sat alone for a long time, looking at the boy who had once followed her everywhere.

She never threw the photographs away.

She never stopped missing him.

But she also never called.

“Ma'am,” Vaasanthi asked gently, “did you ever think that he might be missing you too?”

Lalitha's eyes glistened.

“Yes. I thought about it many times.”

“Then what stopped you from taking the first step?”

Lalitha was quiet for a while.

“Perhaps I had made my hurt into a kind of identity. I had become the sister who had been wronged. If I called him, I was afraid that I would lose the right to be angry.”

She looked at Vaasanthi.

“Do you understand what I mean?”

Vaasanthi nodded slowly.

“Yes, ma'am.”

She understood more than she wanted to admit.

Sometimes, a person held on to anger because letting go of it seemed like letting go of the evidence that they had been hurt.

The anger became a reminder.

I suffered.

I was wronged.

I deserved better.

Those statements might all be true. But when anger became the only way to remember the pain, it could also prevent a person from discovering whether anything better was still possible.

Lalitha's voice softened.

“I did not realise that I could acknowledge my hurt and still make an effort to rebuild the relationship. I thought I had to choose between the two.”

“What helped you change your mind?”

Lalitha smiled.

“A wedding invitation.”

Mohan's daughter was getting married.

The invitation arrived by post, accompanied by a short note.

Akka, I hope you will attend. It would mean a lot to me.

There was no elaborate explanation. No apology. No discussion of the past.

Just a simple request.

Lalitha held the invitation for a long time.

She wanted to attend the wedding. She wanted to see her niece. She wanted to stand beside her brother during one of the happiest occasions of his life.

But she was uncertain whether she would be welcome. She called a relative who was close to both families.

“Has Mohan asked you to invite me?” she asked.

The relative replied, “He told me that he hopes you will come.”

Lalitha felt her heart begin to race.

“He said that?”

“Yes. He has been talking about you. He wants you to attend.”

She sat down.

For years, she had believed that Mohan did not care enough to contact her.

Now she was hearing that he wanted her there.

It was not proof that he had never been hurt or angry. It did not mean that he accepted all the responsibility for their estrangement. But it was a small opening, and Lalitha could not ignore it.

She decided to attend the wedding.

When she arrived at the hall, Mohan saw her from across the room.

For a moment, they simply looked at each other.

He walked towards her.

“Akka.”

She tried to smile.

“Mohan.”

Neither knew what to say next.

Then he asked, “How are you?”

“I am fine. How are you?”

“I'm fine.”

The conversation might have ended there. But Lalitha remembered the years they had lost.

She remembered their mother asking about him.

She remembered the photographs she had kept, the festivals that had passed, and the many times she had imagined calling him.

She took a breath.

“Mohan, can we speak for a few minutes?”

He looked at her carefully.

“Yes, Akka.”

They moved to a quieter corner of the hall.

Lalitha began by saying that she was sorry for the words she had spoken during their argument.

“I was tired and angry,” she said. “I felt that I was carrying too much responsibility, and I wanted you to understand that. But I should not have told you to stop visiting us.”

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Mohan listened without interrupting.

She continued.

“I expected you to call me. I thought that if you cared about me, you would come back. I did not consider that you might be waiting for the same thing from me.”

Mohan's eyes filled with tears.

“Akka, I was hurt too. I felt that everything I had done was being dismissed. I thought you believed I was a bad brother.”

Lalitha shook her head.

“I never stopped believing that you were my brother.”

He looked away.

“I never stopped thinking of you as my sister.”

For several moments, neither spoke.

Then Mohan said, “I should have called you.”

Lalitha replied, “I should have called you too.”

They did not settle every question that afternoon. They did not suddenly agree about the past. They did not pretend that the years of silence had been harmless.

But they began speaking.

They attended the wedding together.

They sat beside each other during the meal, exchanged stories about their children, and remembered their mother.

Before leaving, Mohan asked Lalitha to visit him.

She promised she would.

This time, she kept the promise.

Their relationship was not restored in a single day, but it was given another chance. They made regular calls, visited each other's homes, and slowly learned to discuss disagreements before they became reasons for silence.

Years later, Lalitha would still say that the wedding invitation had changed her life.

Not because the invitation had solved everything. Because it had given her a reason to take the first step.

When Lalitha finished speaking, the studio was silent.

Vaasanthi had conducted many interviews by then. She had learned how to maintain her composure when guests described painful experiences. She had learned to avoid interrupting an emotional pause and to allow people to finish their thoughts in their own time.

But Lalitha's story had affected her differently.

Perhaps because it did not offer a simple villain.

Lalitha had been exhausted and hurt. Mohan had felt misunderstood. Both had believed that the other person should make the first move. Both had allowed their assumptions to harden into certainty.

Neither had intended to lose the relationship forever.

Yet years had passed.

“Ma'am,” Vaasanthi asked, “what would you say to someone who is listening to your story and thinking about a relationship in their own life?”

Lalitha looked directly at her.

“I would ask them to think carefully about what they are waiting for.”

She paused.

“Are they waiting for an apology? Are they waiting for an explanation? Are they waiting for the other person to acknowledge their pain? Those are understandable wishes. But sometimes, we can begin a conversation without giving up our right to express those feelings.”

She continued.

“You can say, 'You hurt me, and I want you to understand why.' You can say, 'I am sorry for what I did.' You can say, 'I don't want us to lose this relationship without trying to understand each other.' None of those sentences makes you smaller.”

Vaasanthi listened.

“And if the other person refuses?”

“Then you have to accept that you cannot decide for both of you. But you can decide what kind of person you want to be in the situation.”

Lalitha smiled gently.

“I wanted to be a sister who had tried. Not a sister who had spent the rest of her life wondering whether one conversation could have saved us.”

Vaasanthi felt tears gathering in her eyes.

She lowered her head for a moment, pretending to check her notes.

When she looked up again, she asked one final question.

“Do you think it is possible to forgive someone and still remember that they hurt us?”

“Of course,” Lalitha replied. “Forgiveness does not require us to erase our memories. It means that we decide what we want to do with those memories.”

She paused.

“I remember the argument with my brother. I remember how much it hurt. But I also remember the day we spoke again. I remember the relief of knowing that we had not allowed the argument to become the final chapter of our relationship.”

She looked at Vaasanthi.

“We cannot always change what happened. But sometimes, we can change what happens next.”

The interview ended a few minutes later.

Vaasanthi thanked Lalitha and accompanied her towards the studio exit.

Before leaving, the older woman turned back.

“You know, I spent many years teaching children to correct their mistakes. If a child wrote the wrong answer, I would ask them to look at the question again, understand where they had gone wrong, and try once more.”

She smiled.

“But in my own life, I took much longer to learn the same lesson.”

Vaasanthi smiled through the emotion in her eyes.

“Perhaps we all do, ma'am.”

Lalitha nodded.

“Perhaps.”

Then she left.

Vaasanthi remained standing near the door, thinking about the sister who had waited for her brother, the brother who had waited for his sister, and the wedding invitation that had finally broken their silence.

She had once believed that taking the first step meant giving the other person the satisfaction of being right.

Now she was beginning to understand that the first step did not have to settle the argument.

It only had to begin the conversation.

That evening, Vaasanthi returned home with a heaviness she could not explain.

She had been moved by Lalitha's story, but the emotion she felt was not entirely sadness.

There was something else.

Recognition.

She was beginning to recognise the pattern of silence in her own family.

Her mother had been hurt.

Her father had been absent.

She had grown up longing for affection while being told, directly or indirectly, that the relationship was no longer part of their lives.

She could understand why Radha might have wanted to protect herself from further pain. She could understand why a woman who felt abandoned might refuse to open the door again.

But she could also understand the cost of that refusal.

A child had grown up without knowing her father.

And now, that child was an adult who could not remember the last time she had heard him say her name.

She entered the living room.

Radha was sitting on the sofa, reading a magazine.

“Amma,” Vaasanthi said, “I interviewed a retired teacher today.”

Radha looked kept the magazine aside and said, she get some coffee and discuss.



Radha came with coffee cups in 10 minutes and asked Vaasanthi,

“What did she teach?”

“Schoolchildren. For almost forty years.”

“Very good. Such people are rare nowadays.”

“Yes.”

Vaasanthi sat beside her.

“She had a younger brother. They stopped speaking for many years after an argument.”

Radha's expression changed almost imperceptibly.

“Did they reconcile?”

“Yes. At their niece's wedding.”

“How?”

“The teacher took the first step. She apologised for something she had said during the argument. Then her brother explained how he had felt. They realised that both had been hurt and both had been waiting.”

Radha closed the magazine.

“Vaasanthi, there are many sides to every story. You cannot understand a relationship from a few minutes of conversation.”

“I know, Amma.”

“People who are not involved often make reconciliation sound easy. They do not know what happened behind closed doors.”

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

She did not want to dismiss her mother's experience.

“You are right,” she said. “I don't know everything that happened between two people just because I have heard one story.”

Radha looked at her, perhaps surprised that Vaasanthi had agreed so readily.

“But,” Vaasanthi continued, “I think that is exactly why listening matters. If we don't know the other side, how can we be certain that we understand the whole story?”

Radha's eyes narrowed slightly.

“What are you trying to tell me?”

Vaasanthi felt her heart beating faster.

She could hear her mind warning her not to go further.

Not today. She is not ready. You are not ready. Don't turn an ordinary evening into an argument.

Her heart spoke more quietly.

You don't have to accuse her. You can simply tell her what you feel.

Vaasanthi took a breath.

“Amma, I am not trying to blame you. I am only thinking about how much people can lose when they stop speaking to each other.”

Radha looked away.

“Sometimes, speaking causes more pain.”

“Yes. Sometimes it does.”

Vaasanthi paused.

“But sometimes, not speaking causes pain too.”

Radha did not respond.

Vaasanthi wanted to say more. She wanted to ask why her father had never been allowed to explain himself to her. She wanted to ask whether Radha had ever considered that he might have wanted to repair their relationship. She wanted to know whether the years of silence had been a decision made after careful thought or a decision that had gradually become impossible to reverse.

But she stopped.

She was not ready to ask those questions without becoming emotional. And she did not want her first honest conversation with her mother about the past to become a battle in which both of them tried to defend themselves.

So she stood up.

“Your coffee is getting cold, Amma.”

Radha glanced at the cup on the table.

“Yes. I forgot about it.”

Vaasanthi went to the kitchen and brought fresh coffee.

They drank in silence.

But this silence was different from the one that had existed between them during the previous weeks.

It was not comfortable.

It was not resolved.

Yet, for the first time, Vaasanthi had expressed a thought that her mother could not easily ignore.

And Radha had heard it.

Later that night, Vaasanthi sat at her study table.

She opened her notebook and wrote:

A relationship can be hurt by what is said. It can also be hurt by what is never said.

She read the sentence twice.

Then she added:

Taking the first step does not mean accepting all the blame. It means accepting responsibility for the part we can control.

She stopped writing.

For years, she had believed that her father should have done more.

Perhaps he should have.

Perhaps he had made mistakes that had contributed to the separation.

Perhaps he had not understood her mother as well as he should have.

She did not know.

But she was beginning to see that the question of who had been wrong was not the only question worth asking.

There was another.

What can I do now?

She could not return to childhood and ask her father to carry her on his shoulders again.

She could not recover the school functions he had missed, the birthdays he had not attended, or the ordinary evenings when she had wanted to tell him about her day.

She could not force her mother to revisit painful memories before she was ready.

And she could not make her father respond to a call if she eventually decided to make one.

But she could learn the truth. She could listen.

She could decide for herself what the past meant, instead of allowing unanswered questions to determine the rest of her life.

She could make an honest attempt without promising herself that everything would end happily.

And if the attempt failed, she could at least know that she had not allowed fear alone to make the decision.

She looked at the photograph.

For the first time, she did not feel the need to ask whether her father had been right or wrong.

She wanted to ask something simpler.

What happened, Daddy?

The question was not an accusation. It was not forgiveness.

It was not an invitation to return to a life that could never be exactly as it had been.

It was simply a question from a daughter who had lived too long without an answer.

Vaasanthi took out her phone.

She opened the search page where she had tried to find her father's contact details.

She had remembered a distant relative who had once mentioned that Kishan lived in another part of the city. She did not know whether that information was still current, but she could begin there.

She typed the relative's name.

Then she stopped. Her thumb hovered over the screen.

Her heart urged her to continue. Her mind warned her to wait.

For a few moments, the two argued as they had so many times before.

Finally, Vaasanthi closed the search page.

Not because she had decided never to contact her father.

Because she knew she was not yet ready to take that step tonight.

She placed the phone beside the photograph.

“Soon,” she whispered.

Then she looked at the photograph again and corrected herself.

“Not someday. Soon.”

It was a small promise, and she did not yet know whether she would keep it.

But it was the first time she had made a promise to herself about her father.

And sometimes, the distance between a person and the truth begins to shrink long before they actually meet.

It shrinks when they stop running from the question.

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It shrinks when they admit that the answer matters.

It shrinks when they finally understand that they have a choice.

Vaasanthi switched off the light.

Tomorrow, she would return to work. She would conduct more interviews, meet more people, and continue learning from their lives.

But tonight, she had learned something from her own.

She had spent fifteen years waiting for a story to end.

Now, she was beginning to wonder whether she could help write what came next.

Chapter 9:

Vaasanthi had never been afraid of a telephone.

She had answered calls during live broadcasts, spoken to strangers who were angry about overflowing drains, questioned officials who tried to avoid responsibility, and interviewed people whose achievements had inspired millions. She had even learned to remain calm when an interviewee answered a question with another question.

Yet, on a quiet Tuesday morning, she found herself staring at a name on her phone as though it belonged to a person she had never known.

Malathi Atta.

She had found the number the previous evening through a distant relative who had once attended a family gathering at her grandparents' house. The woman had hesitated when Vaasanthi asked about her father's side of the family. She had asked why Vaasanthi wanted the number after so many years.

Vaasanthi had not known how to explain it.

I want to know my father.

The sentence had formed in her mind, but she had been unable to say it aloud.

Eventually, the relative had shared Malathi's number, adding gently, "She is Kishan's younger sister. If anyone knows what happened in those years, she will."

Vaasanthi had saved the number.

She had not called.

Now, the phone lay beside her breakfast plate. Her tea had gone cold, and Radha was in the kitchen preparing for the day.

Vaasanthi picked up the phone and looked at the number again.

What would she say?

Hello, Atta. I am Vaasanthi.

Would Malathi recognize her voice? Would she be happy? Would she ask why Vaasanthi had taken so long to call? Would she begin talking about her father before Vaasanthi was ready to hear everything?

And the question that frightened her most—

Would she tell Kishan?

Vaasanthi locked the phone and placed it face down.

"Your tea is getting cold," Radha called from the kitchen.

"I know, Amma."

"You have been sitting there for ten minutes."

"I have some work to finish."

Radha came into the dining room, wiped her hands on a towel, and glanced at the phone.

"Something important?"

Vaasanthi looked up.

For a moment, she considered telling her mother about the number. Perhaps honesty would be easier than hiding it. But she remembered the three days of silence that had followed her confession about meeting Kishan. She remembered the fear in Radha's eyes, the hurt, and the condition she had placed before forgiving her daughter.

She was not ready for another confrontation.

"Just an old contact," she said.

Radha nodded and returned to the kitchen.

Vaasanthi felt a small discomfort settle inside her.

She had always believed that avoiding unnecessary explanations was practical. But lately, she had begun to recognize the difference between protecting one's peace and hiding behind silence.

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She was not ready to tell her mother everything.

But she was beginning to understand that she could not keep postponing every difficult conversation simply because it might become uncomfortable.

She picked up the phone once more.

Then she put it in her handbag and left for work.

The newsroom was already alive when Vaasanthi arrived.

Phones rang from different desks. Reporters discussed developing stories. Someone was arguing about the placement of a headline, while an editor was asking for footage that had Daddyrently been promised twenty minutes earlier.

Ravi was standing near the equipment desk, checking his camera batteries.

"You look serious today," he said when she walked past him.

"Do I look different every day?"

"No. Usually you look as though you have already prepared answers to questions nobody has asked. Today you look as though you have a question you don't want to ask."

Vaasanthi stopped.

She gave him a questioning look.

"Since when did you become a philosopher?"

"Since I started working with you. A person has to develop some additional skills to survive this profession."

She laughed.

It was a genuine laugh, brief but unguarded.

Ravi smiled. "There. That looks better."

"Don't get used to it."

"I won't. We have a shoot at eleven. You can return to your serious personality by then."

She shook her head and walked towards her cabin.

Yet his observation stayed with her.

A question you don't want to ask.

Perhaps that was exactly what had been happening.

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For years, she had lived with questions about her father without allowing herself to ask them. She had converted those questions into conclusions and those conclusions into rules.

Her father had left.

Her father had not tried enough.

Her father had chosen his own life over hers.

She had repeated those conclusions until they became part of her identity.

But what if some of them were incomplete?

She sat down at her desk and opened her laptop.

On the corner of the table lay a folder containing the profiles of people she had interviewed over the previous two years. Almost a hundred lives had passed through her notebook. Some had taught her courage. Others had taught her patience, forgiveness, discipline, and the importance of boundaries.

Each interview had given her a small piece of knowledge.

But knowledge was becoming uncomfortable now because it was asking her to apply it to her own life.

It was easier to tell a stranger that a difficult conversation might be worth having.

It was harder to pick up a phone and make that conversation happen.

That afternoon, the channel assigned Vaasanthi an interview with a well-known retired judge, Justice Devendra Rao, who had recently published a book about conflict resolution and the importance of listening.

The interview was scheduled to last thirty minutes.

Vaasanthi prepared questions about his professional career, difficult cases, and the role of communication in resolving disputes. She also read his recent articles, marked passages that interested her, and arranged the questions in a logical sequence.

When the interview began, Justice Rao greeted her warmly.

"I have watched some of your interviews," he said. "You have a habit of allowing people to finish their answers."

"Is that unusual, sir?"

"More unusual than it should be."

Vaasanthi smiled.

She began with his career and gradually moved towards the subject of conflict.

"Sir, you have spent many years listening to people who disagree with one another. In your experience, what is the most common reason that conflicts remain unresolved?"

Justice Rao thought for a moment.

"People often believe that listening means agreeing. It does not. Listening means allowing another person to explain what they believe happened. After listening, you may still disagree. But at least your disagreement is based on what the person actually said, not on what you assumed they meant."

Vaasanthi wrote down a few words.

"Then why do people avoid listening, even when a relationship matters deeply to them?"

"Because listening can threaten the story they have built around themselves."

She looked up.

Justice Rao continued.

"Suppose I believe you have hurt me deliberately. If I listen to your explanation, I may discover that you did not intend to hurt me. I may discover that I misunderstood something. Or I may discover that you did hurt me, and I was right to be upset. But until I listen, I cannot know which is true."

He paused before adding, "Sometimes people prefer certainty, even painful certainty, to the discomfort of discovering that their understanding may be incomplete."

Vaasanthi felt the words settle somewhere deeper than her notes.

She thought of the photograph beside her bed.

A little girl sitting on her father's shoulders.

A man smiling as though carrying his daughter was the easiest happiness in the world.

She had spent years believing she understood what happened to that man and the little girl.

But she had never asked him.

"Sir," she continued, choosing her words carefully, "what if two people are waiting for one another to initiate a conversation? Is it always necessary for one person to take the first step?"

Justice Rao smiled faintly.

"Necessary? Not always. But if a relationship is important to you, it is worth asking yourself whether your pride is more important than the possibility of understanding the other person."

He leaned back in his chair.

"Taking the first step does not mean declaring yourself guilty. It does not mean surrendering your dignity. It simply means that you are willing to create an opportunity for a conversation."

"And if the other person refuses?"

"Then you have learned something important. You cannot force another person to repair a relationship. You can only make an honest attempt from your side. After that, the other person's decision belongs to them."

Vaasanthi nodded slowly.

Justice Rao looked directly at her.

"One thing I have learned over the years is that regret often comes from the conversations we never attempted. We spend years imagining what might have happened if we had spoken. Sometimes the conversation changes everything. Sometimes it changes nothing. But at least we no longer have to live entirely inside our own assumptions."

For a moment, Vaasanthi forgot that the cameras were recording.

She was no longer thinking about the questions she had prepared.

She was thinking about a number saved in her phone.

A number she had carried from home to the office without using.

"Thank you, sir," she said quietly.

Justice Rao smiled.

"Thank you, Vaasanthi. It was a pleasure speaking with you."

When the recording ended, the crew began packing the equipment.

Ravi approached her.

"That was a good interview."

"Yes."

"You have become very quiet again."

She closed her notebook.

"Ravi, do you think it is possible to miss someone you barely remember?"

He did not answer immediately.

"Of course," he said eventually. "Sometimes you miss the person. Sometimes you miss the relationship you wish you had with that person. Sometimes you miss the possibility of what could have been."

Vaasanthi looked at him.

"How do you know the difference?"

"I don't think you always do. Perhaps you have to speak to the person to find out."

She looked away.

Ravi adjusted the camera strap on his shoulder.

"Is this about your father?"

Vaasanthi was silent for a moment.

Then she nodded.

"I found his sister's number."

Ravi did not react dramatically. He did not ask why she had waited so long or tell her what she should do.

He simply said, "That's a step."

"I haven't called her."

"That's the next step, then."

"What if she tells him? What if he wants to meet me? What if I discover things I don't want to know?"

Ravi listened.

"And what if none of those things happens?" he asked gently. "What if you continue wondering for another ten years?"

Vaasanthi's eyes moved towards him.

He immediately added, "I'm not saying you must do anything today. It is your life, and you have to decide when you are ready. But don't let fear make the decision for you without even giving yourself a chance."

The words were simple.

That was why they stayed with her.

That evening, Vaasanthi returned home later than usual.

Radha was sitting in the living room, sorting through a collection of old bills and household documents. The television was on, but she was not watching it.

"Have you eaten?" Radha asked.

"I'll eat in a little while."

"Your father used to say the same thing when he came home late," Radha remarked absentmindedly.

Both women became still.

Radha's fingers stopped moving over the papers.

Vaasanthi looked at her mother.

It was the first time in many days that Radha had mentioned Kishan without anger or an immediate attempt to end the subject.

For a few seconds, neither spoke.

Then Radha resumed sorting the documents.

"Go and freshen up," she said.

Vaasanthi went to her room.

But her mother's sentence followed her.

Your father used to say the same thing.

It was a small detail. An ordinary domestic memory.

Yet it reminded Vaasanthi that before the years of separation, Kishan had not been merely a man who appeared in arguments and family disagreements. He had been someone who came home late, someone whose habits were known to Radha, someone who had occupied a place in the everyday rhythm of their family.

There had been a life before the silence.

She sat on the edge of her bed and took out her phone.

Malathi Atta's number was still there.

For the first time, Vaasanthi did not ask herself whether she should call.

Instead, she asked herself what was stopping her. She was afraid of hearing something painful.

She was afraid of hearing something that would change her understanding of her father.

She was afraid that he might not want to speak to her. And beneath all those fears lay one that was more difficult to admit.

She was afraid that he might want to speak to her very much.

Because if he did, she would have to face the possibility that the years without him had not been inevitable.

She would have to confront the fact that the relationship she had mourned privately might still have had a chance.

And she would have to ask herself why nobody had taken that chance earlier.

Vaasanthi pressed her lips together.

For years, she had believed that not expecting anything from people protected her from disappointment.

Now she was beginning to see the other side of that protection.

It had also prevented her from discovering what people might have been willing to give.

She unlocked her phone.

Her thumb hovered over Malathi's number.

Then, before she could find another reason to postpone it, she pressed the call button.

The phone rang.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Vaasanthi's heart began to beat faster.

She nearly disconnected the call when someone answered.

"Hello?"

The voice was older, gentle, and unfamiliar.

Vaasanthi swallowed.

"Atta?"

There was a brief pause.

"Yes. Who is speaking?"

"My name is Vaasanthi."

Another pause.

Then the woman's voice changed.

"Vaasanthi?"

The way she said the name made Vaasanthi's throat tighten.

"Yes, Atta. I am Kishan's daughter."

For a few seconds, there was no response. Then Vaasanthi heard a soft, unsteady breath.

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"My child..."



Two words.

Only two.

But they carried an affection that Vaasanthi had not expected from a woman she had never spoken to.

"How are you, Atta?" Vaasanthi asked, struggling to keep her voice steady.

"How am I?" Malathi gave a small, disbelieving laugh. "I should be asking you that. How are you, child? Where are you? What are you doing? Are you well?"

"I'm working in a news channel."

"A news channel?"

"Yes. I am a journalist."

"Your father would be so happy to hear that."

Vaasanthi closed her eyes.

There it was again.

Her father.

Not the distant figure from her childhood memories. Not the man about whom she had constructed an entire explanation. Just a father who, according to his sister, would be happy to know what his daughter had become.

"Atta," she said softly, "do you still speak to him?"

"Of course. He is my brother."

Vaasanthi's fingers tightened around the phone.

"Does he... does he ever speak about me?"

Malathi did not answer immediately.

When she finally spoke, her voice was quieter.

"Vaasanthi, your father has never stopped asking about you."

The room seemed to grow very still.

"He asks how you are. Whether you have completed your studies. Whether you are working. Whether you are happy. Whenever he hears about something happening in your life, he wants to know more."

Vaasanthi stared at the wall.

"He knows about my work?"

"Not everything, child. He doesn't know everything. But he tries to find out what he can."

She paused.

"Sometimes he asks me whether you still remember him."

Vaasanthi's eyes filled with tears.

She had never imagined that her father might have been asking that question.

In her mind, he had always been the person who had left her behind. She had never considered that he might have spent years wondering whether she remembered him at all.

"Atta," she whispered, "why didn't he come and meet me?"

Malathi sighed.

"That is a long story, child. And I don't want to tell you half of it and make you misunderstand the other half. There were many things that happened between your parents. Some things were said in anger. Some things were misunderstood. And some things should have been handled differently."

Vaasanthi listened without interrupting.

"I don't want to defend one person by blaming another," Malathi continued. "Your mother has her own pain.

Your father has his. I can tell you what I know, but you must understand that I am his sister. I have seen his side more closely."

"I understand."

"Do you want to speak to him?"

The question came so directly that Vaasanthi stopped breathing for a moment.

She had imagined this conversation many times, but she had not prepared herself for the moment when someone would ask her what she wanted.

Did she want to speak to him?

Yes.

She wanted to hear his voice. She wanted to ask him questions.

She wanted to know whether he remembered the rain tree, the photograph, the little girl who had once sat on his shoulders.

She wanted to know why he had not been part of her life.

She wanted to know whether he had missed her.

But wanting something and being ready for it were not the same.

"I don't know, Atta," she admitted. "I think I do. But I am afraid."

Malathi's voice softened.

"That is understandable, child. Fifteen years is a long time. You cannot expect yourself to resolve everything in one phone call."

Vaasanthi wiped her cheek.

"I am not calling to blame him. I just want to understand what happened."

"That is a good place to begin."

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Ask me anything."

"Please don't tell him that I called. Not yet."

There was a pause.

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Malathi seemed to understand the weight of the request.

"All right. I will not tell him without your permission."

"Thank you, Atta."

"But may I tell you something?"

"Yes."

"Whatever you decide, don't make the decision only out of fear. You have already lost many years to circumstances you did not choose. At least now, let the next step be yours."

Vaasanthi pressed the phone against her ear.

She could not speak.

Malathi continued gently.

"You don't have to forgive anyone today. You don't have to forget anything. You don't even have to meet him immediately. Just give yourself permission to discover the truth."

Vaasanthi's tears finally fell.

"Atta, I don't know why I am crying."

"Because some feelings wait a long time for a place to go, child."

Vaasanthi covered her mouth with her hand.

For years, she had treated tears as evidence that she was losing control. She had taught herself to swallow them before anyone noticed.

But now, listening to a woman who called her *my child* without hesitation, she did not feel weak.

She felt tired.

Tired of holding questions inside her.

Tired of pretending that she had never wanted a father.

Tired of insisting that she did not care about a relationship whose absence had shaped so much of her life.

"Can I call you again, Atta?" she asked.

"Whenever you want."

"And... can I ask you about Daddy, sometime?"

"Whenever you are ready."

They spoke for another few minutes about Vaasanthi's work, Malathi's health, and ordinary family matters. Nothing extraordinary happened. No mystery was solved. No years were restored.

Yet, when the call ended, Vaasanthi remained seated with the phone in her hand.

She had taken a step.

A small one.

But it was hers.

Later that night, Vaasanthi took the old photograph from beside her bed.

She looked at the little girl sitting on Kishan's shoulders.

For the first time, she did not look at the photograph only with sadness.

She wondered what Kishan had felt when he held her.

She wondered whether he had kept photographs of her.

She wondered whether he remembered her childhood voice, the way she had held his fingers, the questions she must have asked him when she was too young to understand the complications of adult relationships.

And she wondered how many times he had wanted to tell her something but had found no way to reach her.

She could not know the answers yet.

She was careful not to replace one unquestioned story with another. Her aunt's affection was not proof that every part of her father's side was right. Her mother's pain was not proof that every part of her father's side was wrong.

There was still much to understand.

But at least she had begun to understand one thing.

She did not have to choose a side before she chose to listen.

Vaasanthi placed the photograph back on the bedside table. Then she opened her phone and saved Malathi's name properly.

Malathi Atta — Dad's sister.

She stared at the name for a moment and smiled through her tears.

It was such an ordinary thing to do. A name saved in a phone.

A conversation lasting a few minutes. A promise to speak again.

But sometimes, the first step towards rebuilding a relationship does not look like reconciliation. It looks like a small willingness to stop running away from the possibility of one.

She switched off the light and lay down. Her mind was still full of questions.

But tonight, the questions did not feel like enemies.

They felt like doors. And for the first time in fifteen years, Vaasanthi was willing to consider opening one of them.

The next morning, she woke earlier than usual.

She made tea, stood near the window, and watched the street slowly come alive. A milkman rode past. A school van stopped at the corner. Somewhere nearby, a woman was calling her child to hurry up.

Ordinary life was beginning another ordinary day.

Vaasanthi took a sip of tea and thought about what Justice Devendra Rao had said.

A person could make an honest attempt.

The other person's response would belong to them.

She had spent much of her life fearing the outcome of a conversation she had never had. She had wanted certainty before taking a risk, as though life promised certainty to anyone who waited long enough.

Now she understood that she might never receive such a promise.

She might call her father and find him eager to speak.

She might call him and discover that both of them struggled to find the right words.

She might hear things that hurt her. She might learn that he, too, had been hurt.

And perhaps, after all those years, they might discover that they were two people who had missed one another while living inside a story neither had been allowed to complete.

She did not know.

But she was beginning to accept that not knowing was not a reason to do nothing.

From the kitchen, Radha called, "Vaasanthi, are you ready? You'll be late."

"Coming, Amma!"

She put down her cup and picked up her handbag.

Her phone was inside it.

Malathi's number was still saved.

Vaasanthi had not called her father. She had not asked for a meeting. She had not told Radha about the conversation.

There was still a long way to go. But the distance no longer seemed impossible.

As she stepped out of the house, a thought came to her with a clarity she had never experienced before.

I may not be able to change the fifteen years that have passed. But I can decide what I do with the years that remain.

She locked the door and walked towards the street.

For the first time, the past was not simply something she carried.

It was something she was willing to face.

And somewhere, in a house not too far away, a man who had spent years wondering about his daughter continued with his day, unaware that she had finally spoken to his sister.

He did not know that a door had opened.

He did not know that his daughter had begun asking questions.

And he certainly did not know that, after fifteen years of waiting, the possibility of hearing her voice was slowly moving from a distant hope towards a real event.

For now, Vaasanthi carried that possibility quietly within her.

She had taken the first step towards the person who might help her understand her father.

The next step would be harder. It would require her to hear his voice.

And when that day came, she would have to decide whether she was ready to listen not only to the father she had missed, but also to the man she had never truly known.

Chapter 10:

For the next three days, Vaasanthi carried a secret that was both comforting and unsettling.

She had spoken to her father's sister.

It was a small conversation, barely long enough to fill an evening. Yet it had disturbed the carefully arranged world inside her. For the first time, someone from her father's family had spoken to her not as though she were a distant memory, not as though she belonged to a chapter that had been closed, but as though she had always belonged.

My child.

Those two words returned to her at unexpected moments.

While she was preparing questions for an interview, she remembered them.

While she was travelling to a reporting location with Ravi, she remembered them.

And sometimes, when she was alone at night, she wondered whether her father had ever wanted to call her *my child* and had been unable to do so.

She was careful not to build an entire new story around a few affectionate words. She had learned enough from her interviews to know that emotions could influence the way people remembered events. Her aunt loved her father. Her mother had her own experiences. And Kishan himself had a story that Vaasanthi had never heard.

She did not want to replace one conclusion with another. She wanted to understand.

That desire was becoming stronger than her fear, although the fear had not disappeared.

On Thursday evening, she finally called Malathi Atta again.

The phone rang only twice.

"Vaasanthi!"

There was such immediate warmth in her aunt's voice that Vaasanthi smiled.

"Hello, Atta. Are you busy?"

"For you? No. Tell me, child. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"I am well. I was actually thinking about you yesterday."

"About me?"

"Yes. I wondered whether you would call again."

Vaasanthi felt a little embarrassed.

"I wanted to call. I just didn't know what to ask."

"That is all right. You don't have to prepare questions for every conversation."

Vaasanthi laughed softly.

"That is difficult for me. I am a journalist, remember?"

"Then today, don't be a journalist. Just be my niece."

The sentence touched her more than she expected.

For years, Vaasanthi had trained herself to approach every difficult situation as a problem to be solved. She gathered information, examined facts, anticipated consequences, and tried to make decisions without allowing emotion to interfere.

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It was a useful habit in her profession.

But relationships did not always respond to preparation.

Sometimes, she was beginning to discover, a person simply had to sit with another person and allow the conversation to unfold.

"All right, Atta," she said. "Today I won't be a journalist."

"Good. Now tell me about your work. Your father would have been proud to know you are a journalist."

There it was again....Her father.

Vaasanthi took a breath asked, "Atta, can I ask you something about him?"

"Of course."

"Please tell me what he was like when I was little."

There was a long pause on the other end. Not an uncomfortable pause, but one filled with memories.

"Your father?" Malathi began. "He was not a man who spoke a great deal about his feelings. But he had a soft heart. He could become stubborn when he believed he was right, and sometimes he would keep arguing long after the argument had stopped being useful."

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Vaasanthi smiled despite herself.

"That doesn't sound very soft-hearted."

"Wait until I finish!" Malathi laughed. "He had his faults, child. I won't pretend otherwise. But he cared deeply about his family. When you were born, he was so happy that he called me several times that day. He kept asking whether you had opened your eyes, whether you had cried, whether you had eaten."

Vaasanthi sat down on the edge of her bed.

She had never heard these details.

"When you were a little older, he used to bring you small things whenever he came home. Sometimes sweets, sometimes a toy, sometimes a storybook. Once, he bought you a pair of shoes that were too large because he thought you would grow into them."

Vaasanthi laughed.

"Amma says I used to refuse to wear shoes that were even slightly uncomfortable."

"Exactly! You cried, and he spent the entire evening trying to convince you that the shoes were beautiful. In the end, your mother had to buy you another pair."

Vaasanthi could almost see it.

A little girl refusing to wear oversized shoes. A young father trying to reason with a child who had already made up her mind.

A family laughing over something that had no lasting importance.

"Did he really do all that?"

"Of course. Why would I invent it?"

Vaasanthi lowered her eyes.

Because she had spent so many years believing that her father had no place in her childhood, she had rarely allowed herself to imagine him participating in its ordinary moments.

She had remembered the photograph, but she had treated it as an exception.

Now she was discovering that there might have been many other moments she could no longer remember.

"Atta," she asked after a while, "what happened between him and Amma?"

Malathi became quiet.

Vaasanthi waited.

"I knew you would ask me that one day," her aunt said.

"I don't want you to hide anything from me. But I don't want you to tell me only his side, either. I want to understand what really happened."

"That is fair."

Malathi took a moment before continuing.

"I was not present for every conversation between your parents. I cannot tell you what your mother felt in every moment, and I cannot say that your father handled everything correctly. But I can tell you what I remember and what your father told me."

"Please."

"Your parents loved one another when they married. They had disagreements, as many couples do. Some were about family responsibilities. Some were about decisions they made differently. Sometimes your father thought your mother was being too strict. Sometimes your mother thought he was not taking her concerns seriously enough."

Vaasanthi listened without interrupting.

"Neither of them was very good at stepping away from an argument when it became too heated. Your father could become defensive. Your mother could become very firm. When both people believe they must prove their point, even a small disagreement can become a large one."

Malathi paused.

"One argument became another. Words were said. Feelings were hurt. And then, instead of resolving the original issue, they began remembering every previous issue."

Vaasanthi knew that pattern.

She had seen it in people she interviewed. She had seen it in families who called the channel to complain about neighbours, relatives, and disputes that had grown far beyond their original cause.

A disagreement might begin with a practical matter.

But when people felt unheard, the disagreement became personal.

Soon, they were no longer discussing what had happened. They were arguing about who had always been wrong.

"Did Daddy leave the house?" Vaasanthi asked.

"He did, after things became very difficult. I don't want to give you the impression that your mother simply asked him to leave and he had no choice. There were decisions on both sides. But I know your father hoped the separation would be temporary."

"And Amma?"

"I cannot tell you exactly what she expected. You should ask her about her feelings when she is ready to speak. She may remember those days differently."

Vaasanthi appreciated that answer. Her aunt was not asking her to condemn her mother.

She was leaving space for another person's experience.

"What happened after he left?"

"At first, your father thought some time apart might allow both of them to calm down. He believed they would eventually speak and sort things out."

"And then?"

"Then time passed. He tried to contact your mother. Sometimes she refused to speak to him. Sometimes the conversation became an argument before they could discuss anything properly. Gradually, the distance became a habit."

Vaasanthi closed her eyes.

A habit.... That was how it happened, wasn't it?

One day without a conversation became another. A missed call became a reason not to call again. An angry sentence became a memory that was easier to revisit than to resolve.

Eventually, the silence itself began to feel like a decision.

"Did he try to contact me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Even when I was small?"

"Yes, child."

"How?"

Malathi hesitated.

"He tried to reach your mother. He asked about you. There were times when he wanted to meet you, but the circumstances did not allow it. I know he could have handled some things differently. Perhaps he could have found another way to communicate with you. Perhaps he should have tried harder in some moments. I will not tell you that he made every possible choice correctly."

Vaasanthi opened her eyes.

"But he didn't forget me?"

"No."

The answer came without hesitation.

"No, Vaasanthi. He did not forget you."

Something inside her loosened, and something else tightened.

She had wanted this answer for years.

Yet hearing it now did not make her happy in the simple way she had imagined it might.

It made her sad.

Because if her father had not forgotten her, then there had been another person somewhere in the world who had been carrying an absence similar to hers.

They had both been living with the same relationship, but from opposite ends of a silence neither had managed to break.

"Atta," she whispered, "why didn't he come and get me?"

Malathi's voice softened.

"That is a question you should ask him, child. I can explain what I know, but I cannot answer for him. He may have reasons. Some may satisfy you. Some may not. And perhaps there are things he himself regrets."

Vaasanthi appreciated her aunt even more for saying that.

She did not need someone to give her a perfect father.

She needed an opportunity to meet the real man.

A man who might have loved her, made mistakes, felt helpless, remained stubborn, and waited too long.

A man who might be neither the villain she had imagined nor the hero she could now be tempted to create.

Just her father.

"Can I ask one last question?" she said.

"Ask, child."

"Does he know that I am trying to find out about him?"

"No. I have not told him anything about your calls."

"Would you tell him if I asked you to?"

"Yes."

Vaasanthi took a slow breath.

"Not yet, Atta. Please give me a little more time."

"Take all the time you need. But remember, child, time can help us become ready. It can also become an excuse to remain afraid. You will have to recognize the difference."

Vaasanthi smiled faintly.

"You sound like one of the people I interview."

"And you sound like someone who needs to stop interviewing people and listen to her aunt!"

Both of them laughed.

When the call ended, Vaasanthi sat quietly for a long time.

She had received no dramatic revelation. Her aunt had not explained every argument or answered every question.

But the picture in Vaasanthi's mind had begun to change.

Her father had become a person again.

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Not simply the man who had disappeared from her childhood.

A man who bought shoes that were too large. A man who called his sister when his daughter was born. A man who could be stubborn, who made mistakes, who may have waited when he should have acted, and who had Daddyrently continued asking about his daughter long after she stopped expecting him to.

For the first time, Vaasanthi wanted to know him not merely because he was her father, but because he was a human being whose life had become entangled with hers.

She wanted to understand the choices he had made.

And she wanted to understand the choices he had failed to make.

The following week, Vaasanthi was assigned an interview that affected her in an entirely different way.

Her guest was a retired school headmistress named Janaki Narayanan, who had spent nearly four decades teaching children in government schools. She had recently started a small initiative to help children who had dropped out of school return to education.

Janaki was not a celebrity.

She did not have millions of followers or a list of awards that filled several pages. She arrived at the studio carrying a cloth bag, wearing a simple cotton saree, and apologizing for being a few minutes late because she had stopped to speak to a parent outside the building.

Vaasanthi liked her immediately.

During the interview, Janaki spoke about children who had abandoned their education because of poverty, family difficulties, or the belief that they were not intelligent enough to succeed.

"Sometimes," Janaki said, "a child doesn't need a grand opportunity. The child needs one adult who refuses to give up on them."

Vaasanthi leaned forward.

"How do you convince a child who has already decided that nobody cares?"

"You don't begin by convincing them. You begin by showing up."

"Showing up?"

"Again and again. You tell them you will come tomorrow, and then you come tomorrow. You tell them you will help them with their lessons, and you sit beside them and do it. Gradually, they stop judging you by what you say and begin trusting you because of what you do."

Vaasanthi wrote something in her notebook.

Janaki continued.

"Children learn what relationships mean through their experiences. If the important people in their lives disappear, the children may begin believing that they are not worth staying for. Some become angry. Some stop asking for anything. Others become so independent that they refuse help even when they need it."

Vaasanthi's pen stopped.

She thought of the girl she had been.

The girl who had stopped asking when her father would visit.

The girl who had learned not to look towards the gate whenever a vehicle stopped outside.

The girl who had decided that needing someone was a weakness because wanting someone who was absent hurt too much.

Janaki looked at her.

"Are you all right, Vaasanthi?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please continue."

Janaki did not press her.

She spoke about the importance of consistency, about the need to distinguish between a child's behaviour and the pain beneath it, and about the patience required to rebuild trust.

Near the end of the interview, Vaasanthi asked, "Ma'am, if an adult wants to reconnect with someone after many years, is it possible to rebuild a relationship that has been absent for so long?"

Janaki smiled gently.

"It is possible to begin. Rebuilding is a different matter. It takes time, honesty, and effort from both sides."

She folded her hands in her lap.

"But I would never tell someone to avoid making an attempt simply because too much time has passed. If the relationship matters to you and it is safe to approach the person, you can begin with one conversation. You do not have to promise the other person your entire future. You only have to be willing to give the present moment an opportunity."

Vaasanthi felt the familiar pull of emotion.

"And if the other person doesn't respond?"

"Then you must respect that choice. Your responsibility is to make an honest attempt, not to control the outcome. We can open a door, but we cannot force someone to walk through it."

Janaki paused.

"However, I do think there is a special kind of peace in knowing that you tried. You may still feel sadness. You may still wish things had been different. But you won't have to spend the rest of your life wondering whether one sincere conversation might have changed something."

Vaasanthi looked at the woman across from her.

She thought about her aunt's number.

She thought about the years she had spent refusing to consider the possibility that her father might have something to say.

And she realized that she had been asking the wrong question.

She had been asking, *What if I call him and regret it?*

She had not been asking, *What if I never call him and regret that instead?*

Both possibilities frightened her.

But they were not the same.

One involved an attempt that might bring pain, clarity, disappointment, or hope.

The other involved choosing not to know, and allowing that decision to follow her into the future.

When the interview ended, Vaasanthi thanked Janaki warmly.

As the crew packed up, the elderly woman reached for her cloth bag.

"May I tell you something, child?"

"Of course, ma'am."

"Sometimes, when we speak about relationships, we spend too much time deciding who should have taken the first step. We ask who was more wrong, who was more stubborn, who should have apologized first."

Janaki smiled.

"But if the relationship matters to you, there is another question worth asking. What kind of person do you want to be when you look back on this day?"

Vaasanthi stood still.

"I don't mean that you should take responsibility for another person's mistakes," Janaki continued. "You should not. I mean that you should make your own choice consciously. If you decide to reach out, reach out because it is what you believe is right. If you decide to keep your distance because the relationship is harmful, do that with equal clarity. Don't let resentment or fear make every decision for you."

Vaasanthi nodded.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Janaki touched her hand affectionately.

"I hope you always have the courage to ask the questions that matter to you."

Vaasanthi watched her walk away.

For several seconds, she remained beside the studio door.

Then she opened her notebook and wrote one sentence beneath the notes from the interview.

What kind of person do I want to be when I look back on this day?

She underlined it once.

That evening, Radha noticed the change in her daughter.

"You have been smiling to yourself all day," she said while serving dinner.

"Have I?"

"Yes. Either something very good has happened at work, or you are planning something."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"Why can't it be both?"

Radha looked at her more closely.

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Amma."

Vaasanthi wanted to tell her.

She wanted to say that she had spoken to Malathi Atta. That she had heard stories about Kishan buying her shoes and asking about her childhood. That she was beginning to understand how two people could remain trapped in a conflict long after the original disagreement had lost its importance.

But she also knew that Radha might hear those details as an accusation.

Perhaps she would feel that Vaasanthi was questioning the pain she had experienced.

Perhaps she would feel that the daughter she had raised was beginning to doubt her.

Vaasanthi did not want to use her growing understanding of Kishan to dismiss Radha's feelings.

Both things could be true. Her mother could have been hurt. Her father could have been hurt.

Both could have made mistakes.

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And Vaasanthi could have lost something precious because the adults in her life had been unable, or unwilling, to find a way through their differences.

Understanding one truth did not require denying another.

"Amma," she said carefully, "do you ever think about the years before Daddy left?"

Radha's hand stopped above the serving bowl.

"Why are you asking?"

"I was just thinking about the past."

"Why now?"

Vaasanthi considered giving a casual answer, but she decided against it.

"Because I am growing older. And I have realized that I know very little about what happened in our family before I was old enough to understand."

Radha put the bowl down.

"There were many things, Vaasanthi. Things you were too young to understand."

"I know."

"You don't know how difficult some of those days were."

"You're right. I don't."

Radha looked at her, perhaps surprised by the absence of an argument.

Vaasanthi continued softly.

"I am not saying you were wrong, Amma. I am not saying Daddy was right. I just want to understand what happened."

Radha's expression tightened.

"What is there to understand now? We have lived our lives. You have grown up. You have a good job. Why do you want to reopen everything?"

Vaasanthi felt the familiar instinct to retreat.

She could end the conversation here. She could say she had only been curious.

She could protect the evening from becoming uncomfortable.

But she remembered the lesson that had been following her through every interview.

A conversation did not have to become an argument merely because two people felt differently.

"I don't want to reopen old wounds just to hurt you, Amma," she said. "I want to understand them because they have been part of my life too."

Radha's eyes filled with a complicated emotion.

For a moment, Vaasanthi thought her mother might speak.

Instead, Radha turned away.

"Not today, Vaasanthi."

The words were quiet, but firm.

Vaasanthi nodded.

"All right, Amma. Not today."

She did not insist. She did not demand an explanation.

She did not accuse her mother of refusing to listen. She simply accepted that Radha was not ready.

It was a difficult decision, but she understood something now that she had not understood before.

Taking the first step did not mean dragging someone else forward.

It meant making an honest attempt and respecting the other person's readiness, even when waiting was uncomfortable.

Vaasanthi finished her dinner and helped clear the table.

Later, when she entered her room, she found herself thinking about the conversation.

She had tried to speak. Her mother had not been ready.

That was painful, but it was not the end of the story. She had made an attempt. She had not forced the outcome.

And she had not allowed the conversation to become a battle over who was right.

Perhaps this, too, was progress.

On Sunday morning, Vaasanthi woke with a decision forming in her mind.

She did not want to remain indefinitely in the space between wanting to know and being afraid to find out.

She had spoken to Malathi. She had heard stories about her father.

She had begun asking her mother questions, even though the answers had not yet come.

Now she wanted to hear Kishan's voice. Not because she had decided to forgive him.

Not because she had concluded that he had been right.

Not because she wanted to punish her mother or prove that her own childhood had been unfair.

She wanted to speak to him because he was her father, because the relationship mattered to her, and

because she could no longer accept that fifteen years of silence should determine every year that followed.

She took her phone and called Malathi.

"Good morning, Atta."

"Good morning, child. Is everything all right?"

"Yes. I wanted to ask you something."

"Tell me."

Vaasanthi's hands grew cold.

"Can I speak to Daddy?"

There was silence.

Not because Malathi had misunderstood the question, but because she understood exactly what it meant.

"Are you sure, Vaasanthi?"

"No," Vaasanthi admitted. "I am not sure about what will happen. I am not sure what he will say or what I will feel. But I am sure that I want to try."

Malathi took a deep breath.

"All right, child."

"Can you give me his number?"

"I can. But before I do, I want you to remember something. You don't have to settle everything in one conversation. You can ask what you need to ask. You can tell him what you feel. And if it becomes too much, you can take a break."

Vaasanthi smiled through her nervousness.

"Thank you, Atta."

"I am proud of you for thinking carefully about this."

A few moments later, a message arrived.

A phone number.....Vaasanthi stared at it.

She had spent three days looking at Malathi's number before making the first call. Now she was looking at Kishan's number, and the years between them seemed to gather inside the small screen.

It was only a number.....Ten digits.

No photograph. No explanation. No guarantee But behind it was a man she had once called *Daddy*.

A man whose voice she could not remember clearly. A man who, according to his sister, had continued asking about her.

Vaasanthi saved the number..... She typed a name.

Daddy.

She looked at it for a long time. Then she deleted it.

She typed again.

Kishan.

She stopped.....That name felt too distant.....She deleted it once more and finally saved the contact as:

Daddy — Kishan.

She put the phone down. Then she picked it up again. Her mind began its familiar questioning.

What if he did not answer?... What if he answered and did not recognize her voice?

What if he asked why she had waited so long?.... What if he cried?

What if she cried?

What if the first words between them were awkward, ordinary, and nothing like the emotional reunion she had imagined?

She could not control any of those things. She could only decide whether to make the call.

Vaasanthi stood and walked to the window.

The street outside was bright with the late-morning sun. A child was riding a bicycle, wobbling slightly

whenever the road changed direction. His father walked a few steps behind him, one hand extended, ready to

catch him if he lost his balance.

The boy looked back every few seconds to make sure his father was still there. His father was.

Vaasanthi watched them until they turned at the end of the street. Then she returned to her bed and sat down.

She opened the contact again.

For the first time, she allowed herself to imagine not just the difficult questions she wanted to ask, but the simplest thing she wanted to hear.

His voice..... She wanted to hear him say her name.

She wanted to know whether he would call her Vaasanthi, or whether some old memory would make him call her *Vaasu*, the name she vaguely remembered from the photograph's accompanying family album.

She wanted to know whether his voice would sound like hers. She wanted to know whether she would

recognize anything familiar in it. The longing surprised her.

She had spent so many years convincing herself that she had outgrown the need for him. Now she realized

that the need had not disappeared. She had simply learned to live without admitting it.

Vaasanthi wiped her eyes. Then she made a decision.

She would call him the next evening. Not because the timing was perfect. Not because she was no longer afraid.

But because she did not want fear to keep choosing for her.

She sent Malathi a message.

Atta, I have saved Daddy's number. I will call him tomorrow evening. Please don't tell him beforehand. I want to speak to him myself.

Malathi replied almost immediately.

All right, my child. I will not tell him. Take your time, and speak from your heart.

Vaasanthi read the message twice.

Then she placed the phone beside the photograph.

The little girl in the picture was still smiling. The man carrying her was still smiling.

Nothing about the photograph had changed. But the woman looking at it had.

She was no longer satisfied with knowing only the version of the past that had been repeated to her.

She was ready to hear another voice.....That night, sleep came slowly.

Vaasanthi thought about the interviews that had brought her to this point.

Dr. Revathi had taught her that silence could prevent people from seeking help.

Meera had shown her that a person could mistake fear for a lack of love.

Sukanya had reminded her that a phone call could open a door without repairing everything at once.

Dr. Saroja had taught her that an honest attempt was not surrender.

Sudhakar had shown her how easily *someday* could become twelve lost years.

Lalitha had reminded her that a person could live with regret for the conversations never attempted.

Justice Devendra Rao had taught her that listening did not require agreement.

Janaki had asked her what kind of person she wanted to be when she looked back on the day.

And now, after all those conversations, Vaasanthi had arrived at a question that belonged entirely to her.

Am I willing to give my father an opportunity to speak?

She already knew the answer.... Yes.

Whatever he said, she would listen. Whatever she learned, she would take time to understand it.

She would not promise forgiveness before she knew what needed forgiving. She would not accuse him before she had heard him. And she would not dismiss her mother's pain simply because she was beginning to understand his.

She would listen. Then she would decide what to do with what she learned.

For the first time, she understood that taking the first step was not about guaranteeing a happy ending.

It was about refusing to let an uncertain ending prevent the beginning.

Vaasanthi turned towards the bedside table. Her phone lay next to the photograph.

The contact was saved. The decision had been made. Tomorrow evening, she would call her father.

She did not know whether the conversation would last two minutes or two hours. She did not know whether they would speak easily or struggle through every sentence. She did not know whether the years between them would feel like a wall or a bridge.

She knew only that she had spent fifteen years waiting for a moment that nobody had promised would arrive.

Now she was creating that moment herself.

She closed her eyes.

And somewhere deep inside her, the little girl who had once waited near the gate began, at last, to believe that she might not have to wait forever.

Tomorrow, she would hear her father's voice.

For tonight, that possibility was enough.

Chapter 11:

The following day seemed longer than any day Vaasanthi could remember.

Nothing unusual happened at the office. The newsroom was as busy as ever. Two reporters were sent to cover

a political meeting, the weather desk was preparing a special segment, and Ravi spent most of the afternoon

complaining about a camera battery that refused to cooperate.

Vaasanthi did everything she was supposed to do.

She reviewed footage, prepared questions for an upcoming interview, corrected a few lines in a report, and attended an editorial meeting. She answered calls professionally and spoke to her colleagues with her usual confidence.

From the outside, she was the same Vaasanthi.

Inside, however, the day was divided into two parts. Everything that happened before the evening.

And the phone call that would happen after it. She had decided to call her father at seven o'clock.

At six-thirty, she checked the time.

At six-thirty-five, she checked it again.

At six-forty, she began wondering whether seven was too early.

Perhaps he would be busy. Perhaps he would be travelling. Perhaps he would not be in the mood to speak.

She immediately recognized what she was doing. She was searching for a reason to postpone the call.

She put the phone inside her handbag and concentrated on the report before her.

"Vaasanthi?"

Ravi was standing at her desk.

She looked up.

"Yes?"

"We need to leave in ten minutes. The interview location has changed. The guest wants us at the other office."

She stared at him.

"What interview?"

Ravi looked at her for a second.

"The interview you scheduled for tomorrow. We have to collect some background footage today. Did you forget?"

"No, no. I remember."

He studied her face.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

He pulled a chair closer and sat down.

"Something is bothering you."

"Nothing is bothering me, Ravi."

"Fine. Then I will ask you a different question. How many times have you looked at your phone today?"

Vaasanthi said nothing.

"Because I have seen you checking it at least twenty times."

"Are you counting?"

"No. I am a cameraman. Observing things is part of my profession."

She gave him a tired smile....Ravi's expression softened.

"Is it today?"

She looked at him.

"The call?"

Vaasanthi nodded.

"Yes. Today."

Ravi leaned back.

"Then why are you sitting here worrying about it? You have already decided to call him."

"I know."

"What are you afraid of?"

She looked towards the newsroom windows.

"Everything."

He waited.

"What if he doesn't answer? What if he answers and I don't know what to say? What if he asks me why I never contacted him? What if he says something that hurts me? What if I say something that hurts him?"

She stopped, embarrassed by the number of questions that had escaped her.

Ravi did not smile.

"Those are all possible," he said.

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She looked at him in surprise.

"You could at least try to encourage me."

"I am encouraging you. If I tell you that everything will go perfectly, you will know I am lying. I don't know what will happen, Vaasanthi. Neither do you."

He paused.

"But you have spent fifteen years wondering about this relationship. One phone call may not solve anything. It may not even give you all the answers. But at least you will no longer be wondering what would happen if you called."

She lowered her eyes.

"That's what I keep telling myself."

"Then believe yourself."

He stood up.

"And one more thing."

"What?"

"You don't have to perform an interview. You don't have to prepare the perfect opening question. You don't have to control the conversation. You can simply be his daughter."

He walked away before she could respond.

Vaasanthi watched him return to his equipment.

For the first time that day, she smiled without forcing herself to.

You can simply be his daughter.

It sounded so easy when Ravi said it.

She wondered when she had stopped allowing herself to be one.

At six-fifteen, Vaasanthi reached home.

Radha was in the kitchen, preparing dinner. The aroma of cumin and curry leaves filled the house. A pressure cooker whistled, and the familiar sounds of cooking made the evening feel almost ordinary.

Almost.

"You're early today," Radha said.

"The work finished a little sooner."

"Good. You can have dinner before it gets late."

"I'll eat in a while, Amma."

Radha turned to look at her.

"You have been saying that for the past three days. Is something wrong?"

Vaasanthi hesitated.

She had promised herself that she would not make this phone call out of anger, rebellion, or a desire to hurt her mother.

She was making it because she wanted to understand her father.

But she had not decided what she would do if Radha discovered the call.

Would she be able to explain herself calmly?

Would Radha listen?

Or would the silence return?

She did not know.

"Nothing is wrong, Amma," she said gently. "I am just thinking about a few things."

Radha returned to the stove.

"You think too much sometimes."

Vaasanthi almost laughed.

If only you knew, Amma.

She went to her room and closed the door.

At six-thirty, she sat on the edge of her bed.

At six-forty, she stood up and walked to the window.

At six-fifty, she checked the phone again.

The number was still there.

Daddy — Kishan.

She opened the contact and looked at it.

Then she returned to the photograph beside her bed.

The little girl on her father's shoulders seemed impossibly small.

She tried to remember his face from that time.

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The shape of his eyes. His smile. The way he might have called her when she ran too far ahead.

Her memories were incomplete, but she could remember one thing.

She had once felt safe with him.

She did not know when that feeling had disappeared. Perhaps it had not disappeared all at once. Perhaps it had faded gradually, replaced by questions, explanations, and years of learning not to expect him.

She touched the edge of the photograph.

"I don't know what to say to you, Daddy," she whispered.

Then she looked at the clock.

Seven o'clock.

For a few seconds, she did nothing.

The phone was in her hand. Her father's number was on the screen.

Her thumb hovered over the call button. She could still postpone it.

There would always be another day. Another evening. Another reason to wait until she felt more prepared.

But she remembered the words she had written in her notebook.

What kind of person do I want to be when I look back on this day?

She did not want to remember this evening as another moment when fear had made her decision.

She pressed the call button. The phone rang. Vaasanthi held it against her ear.

One ring.

Two.

Three.

She began to wonder whether he would answer.

Then the call connected.

"Hello?"

The voice was older than she remembered. Or perhaps she did not remember it clearly enough to compare.

It was a simple greeting, spoken in an ordinary tone by a man who had no idea that the next few seconds might change his life.

Vaasanthi opened her mouth. No words came.



"Hello?" the man repeated. "Who is speaking?"

She swallowed....Her heart was beating so loudly that she could barely hear the phone.

"Daddy?"

Silence.

Not the silence of someone refusing to speak. The silence of someone who had heard something he was afraid to believe.

Vaasanthi closed her eyes.

"Daddy, it is me."

A breath came through the phone.

Then another.

"Who... who is this?"

The question was barely audible.

Vaasanthi felt tears gathering in her eyes.

"It is Vaasanthi, Daddy."

The next few seconds seemed to stretch beyond time.

She heard a faint movement at the other end, as though he had stood up suddenly or shifted the phone in his hand.

"Vaasu?"

The name broke something open inside her.

Vaasu.

She had not heard anyone call her that in years. She was not even certain she had remembered the name correctly. But the moment he said it, a tiny fragment of childhood stirred within her.

She began to cry.

"Yes, Daddy."

There was a sound like a shaky breath.

"My child..."

He stopped.

She heard him try to speak again.

"My child... is it really you?"

Vaasanthi pressed her free hand against her mouth.

"Yes, Daddy. It is me."

For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

They did not need to.

Fifteen years had gathered between them. Fifteen years of missed birthdays, ordinary conversations, difficult days, celebrations, disappointments, and countless moments when one might have wanted to tell the other something.

All those years had led to this one call. And neither knew how to begin.

Finally, Kishan spoke. "How are you, Vaasu?"

The question was so ordinary that Vaasanthi almost laughed through her tears.

How was she supposed to answer it?

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How was anyone supposed to summarize fifteen years in three words?

"I am fine, Daddy."

"Are you well?"

"Yes."

"Your work... Malathi told me you were working somewhere, but I don't know much. What are you doing now?"

"I am a journalist. I work for a news channel."

"A journalist?"

There was unmistakable surprise in his voice.

"Yes, Daddy."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I report on local events, and I interview people from different fields. Doctors, musicians, sportspeople, social workers... people who have interesting stories to tell."

Kishan was quiet for a moment.

"That sounds like wonderful work."

Vaasanthi smiled through her tears.

"Sometimes it is."

"I am happy for you, Vaasu."

She looked at the photograph.

"I wanted to tell you about it."

The words came out before she could stop them.

Kishan fell silent.

Vaasanthi immediately wondered whether she had said too much.

Then he spoke.

"I would have loved to hear about it, my child."

His voice trembled.

"I would have loved to hear about everything."

Vaasanthi could not speak.

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She had imagined that he might be indifferent. She had imagined that he might be angry with her for taking so long to call. She had imagined awkward questions and explanations.

She had not prepared herself for the possibility that he would sound like a man who had been waiting for this conversation for years.

"Daddy..." she began.

"Yes, Vaasu?"

"Why didn't you call me?"

The question came out more sharply than she intended.

As soon as she heard her own voice, she felt a pang of guilt.

But she did not withdraw the question.

She had called because she wanted to understand. And understanding required the courage to ask things that might hurt.

Kishan did not answer immediately.

When he finally spoke, his voice was quieter.

"I tried, Vaasu."

She closed her eyes.

"Malathi Atta told me."

"She told you?"

"Yes."

He exhaled slowly.

"I don't know what she has told you, and I don't want to speak badly about your mother. She has her own feelings about everything that happened. But I did try to contact you."

"How?"

"I tried speaking to your mother. I asked whether I could meet you. I asked whether I could speak to you on the phone. Sometimes she refused. Sometimes we began arguing before we could talk about you."

He paused.

"After some time, I did not know what to do."

Vaasanthi looked down at her hands.

"But why didn't you keep trying?"

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It was the question that had lived inside her for years.

Kishan was silent for a long time.

When he answered, he did not try to make himself sound perfect.

"Perhaps I should have found another way, Vaasu. Perhaps I should have tried harder in some moments. I don't know whether I made the right decisions every time. I was hurt. I was angry. I felt helpless. And sometimes, when I thought another attempt would only lead to another argument, I waited."

He drew a breath.

"I thought there would be another opportunity."

Vaasanthi's eyes filled again.

"Another opportunity?"

"Yes."

His voice became unsteady.

"I kept thinking that things would settle down. That your mother and I would eventually speak properly. That one day I would be able to meet you and explain everything. I told myself not to give up hope."

He paused.

"But the years passed, Vaasu. And I began to realize that waiting was not bringing me any closer to you."

Vaasanthi listened, her hand trembling around the phone.

"I know you may be angry with me," he continued. "You have every right to ask these questions. You grew up without me. I cannot tell you that those years did not matter. I cannot ask you to forget them because I am your father."

She had never expected him to say that.

He was not asking her to dismiss her childhood.

He was not demanding that she understand him before he understood her.

He was acknowledging the years she had lost.

"I don't know what you have been told about me," he said. "I don't know what you believe. But I want you to know that I have thought about you every day."

Vaasanthi lowered her head.

Every day.

The words hurt because they were both comforting and painful.

If he had thought about her every day, why had they remained strangers for so long?

If he had missed her, why had she spent so many years believing she was not missed?

If he had wanted to speak to her, why had the opportunity never come?

She had so many questions that she did not know which one to ask first.

Finally, she chose the one that mattered most.

"Daddy, did you ever stop wanting to meet me?"

"No."

The answer came immediately.

"No, Vaasu. Never."

He was crying now. She could hear it in the pauses between his words.

"I wanted to see you when you were small. I wanted to know how you were doing in school. I wanted to know what subjects you liked, what you wanted to become, what made you happy. I wanted to be there when you completed your studies. I wanted to see the person you would become."

He stopped.

"I wanted to be your father."

Vaasanthi pressed the phone against her ear.

The tears were falling freely now.

For fifteen years, she had believed that her father had chosen not to be part of her life.

Now she was hearing him say that he had wanted to be there.

She did not yet know the whole truth. She knew there were things he could have done differently. She knew that his desire to meet her did not erase the absence she had experienced.

But she could no longer pretend that his feelings were irrelevant.

"Daddy," she whispered, "I missed you."

The words escaped her before she could protect herself from them.

On the other end, Kishan made a sound that she would remember for the rest of her life.

A broken breath.

A sob he could not hold back.

"Oh, Vaasu..."

He could not finish the sentence.

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Vaasanthi began crying harder.

"I don't remember everything about you," she said. "I have that photograph. I remember some things. But I don't remember your voice properly. Sometimes I wondered whether you remembered me."

"I remembered you."

His answer was immediate.

"I remembered everything I could."

He paused.

"I remember carrying you on my shoulders. I remember how you used to hold my ears when you were afraid of falling. I remember how you would insist that I carry you even when you were getting too big. I remember the way you used to run towards the door when I came home."

Vaasanthi covered her face.

She could not remember all those things.

But he could.

He had carried memories of a little girl who had grown up without him.

"And I remember the day I could no longer come home to you," Kishan continued. "I kept thinking that things would be different soon. I thought we had time."

He took a shaky breath.

"I was wrong about that, Vaasu. We did not get those years back."

For a long time, neither spoke.

Then Vaasanthi asked, "Daddy, can I ask you something difficult?"

"You can ask me anything."

"Do you blame Amma for everything that happened?"

"No."

The answer surprised her.

Kishan continued before she could respond.

"I was hurt by some of the things that happened. I disagreed with some of the decisions she made. There were times when I felt she did not understand me. But I made mistakes too. I became stubborn. I said things in anger. There were times when I could have handled things better."

He paused.

"I don't want you to think that your mother is a bad person because we could not keep our relationship together. She raised you. She took care of you. She gave you the life you have today. I know that."

Vaasanthi stared at the wall.

She had expected him to criticize Radha.

Perhaps she had even prepared herself to defend her mother.

Instead, he was acknowledging her mother's place in his life.

"Then what happened, Daddy?" she asked. "How did everything become so bad?"

Kishan sighed.

"Some things began with small disagreements. We did not resolve them when we should have. Other problems came later. We began interpreting each other's words in the worst possible way. When one of us was hurt, the other became defensive. We stopped listening properly."

He paused.

"I thought your mother should understand why I had said certain things. She thought I should understand why those things had hurt her. We both wanted to be understood. Neither of us was very good at understanding the other."

Vaasanthi listened.

It was a familiar pattern.

She had heard versions of it from people whose relationships had deteriorated over years.

"Was there one big reason?" she asked.

"Not one reason that explains everything. There were several disagreements. Some became bigger than they should have been. We allowed our hurt to grow. We stopped trusting each other's intentions."

He took a breath.

"And once we stopped trusting each other, even a small conversation became difficult."

Vaasanthi thought of the words spoken by Justice Devendra Rao.

People often preferred certainty, even painful certainty, to the discomfort of discovering that their understanding might be incomplete.

She wondered whether her parents had reached a point where each had become so certain of the other's intentions that neither could hear what the other was trying to say.

"Daddy, did you ever think of apologizing to Amma?"

Kishan did not hesitate.

"Many times."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I tried to speak to her. But I don't want to pretend that I always approached her in the best way. Sometimes I went with the intention of explaining myself when what she needed was for me to listen. Sometimes I wanted her to acknowledge my hurt before I could acknowledge hers."

He paused.

"I understand some things better now than I did then. An apology is not useful if you offer it only to end an argument. You have to be willing to understand why the other person was hurt."

Vaasanthi felt something change inside her.

This was not the simple explanation she had imagined.

Her father was not telling her that he had been right about everything. He was not claiming that his intentions should excuse every consequence.

He was looking back at his own behaviour and recognizing where he might have failed.

That mattered to her.

"Would you apologize to her now?" she asked.

Kishan's voice softened.

"If she gave me the opportunity to speak to her, I would."

"Even after all these years?"

"Especially after all these years."

He was silent for a moment.

"Vaasu, I have spent so much time wishing I could go back and handle things differently. I cannot change what happened. But if I had the opportunity to speak to your mother now, I would listen to her. I would tell her where I was wrong. I would ask her to forgive me for the hurt I caused."

He swallowed.

"I would not want to lose another day because of my ego."

Vaasanthi closed her eyes.

She remembered the little girl in the photograph.

She remembered the young woman she had become, determined never to depend on anyone emotionally.

She remembered the interviews that had slowly dismantled the certainty with which she had judged relationships.

And she understood that she was no longer merely trying to find out what had happened between her parents.

She was learning what it meant to be a human being who could be wrong, who could be hurt, and who could still choose to make an effort.

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The conversation lasted much longer than Vaasanthi had expected.

They spoke about her studies, her first job, her experiences in the newsroom, and the interviews that had become such an important part of her life.

Kishan listened to every detail.

When she described her first live report, he laughed with delight.

"When I was small, I used to stand in front of the mirror and pretend to read the news," Vaasanthi said.

"You did?"

"Apparently. I don't remember it very clearly."

"I remember you holding a newspaper upside down and talking as though you were addressing a huge audience."

Vaasanthi laughed.

"Really?"

"Yes! You would not let anyone interrupt you. If someone spoke while you were pretending to read the news, you would become angry."

"That sounds like me even now."

Kishan laughed.

For a few moments, the years between them seemed less important.

They were simply a father and daughter sharing a memory.

Then the conversation quietened again.

"Daddy," Vaasanthi said, "I have interviewed so many people in the past two years. I have heard stories about relationships that were broken and rebuilt. About people who lost touch and found each other again."

"That is good, Vaasu."

"I used to think that relationships were mostly about what people did to one another. If somebody hurt you, you stayed away. If somebody left, you stopped expecting them to return."

She paused.

"But now I think sometimes there are things we don't understand because we never give the other person an opportunity to explain."

Kishan was silent.

"I am not saying that every relationship can be repaired," she continued. "And I am not saying that people should tolerate everything. But I think... if a relationship matters, we should at least try to understand what happened."

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Her voice became quieter.

"I wish I had understood that earlier."

Kishan took a breath.

"So do I, Vaasu."

They sat with that thought, separated by distance but connected by the conversation they had finally allowed themselves to have.

Then Kishan asked a question that Vaasanthi had been dreading.

"Can I meet you?"

Her heart began beating faster.

She had known he might ask.

She had imagined what she would say.

Yet now that the question had arrived, she felt the full weight of it.

Meeting him would make everything real.

A phone call could be ended. A conversation could be postponed. She could put the phone away and return to her ordinary life.

But meeting him would mean looking at the man whose absence had shaped her childhood.

She would have to face him as the woman she had become.

And she would have to allow herself to see him not only as the father she had missed, but as the person he was now.

"Vaasu?" he asked gently. "You don't have to answer immediately."

She appreciated that he did not pressure her.

"I want to meet you, Daddy," she said. "But I need a little time."

"Of course."

"I need to understand my own feelings first. And I need to think about how to speak to Amma."

"I understand."

"Please don't misunderstand me. I am not calling you because I want to hurt her. I am calling because I want to know you."

Kishan's voice trembled again.

"I understand, my child."

"And I don't want us to pretend that the past did not happen."

"No. We should not pretend that."

"I have questions, Daddy. Many questions."

"You have every right to ask them."

"And I may not agree with everything you tell me."

"That is all right."

Vaasanthi wiped her eyes.

"I don't want us to start another relationship based on silence."

For a moment, Kishan said nothing.

Then he replied, "Neither do I."

His voice was quiet but steady.

"If we are going to have a relationship again, Vaasu, let us try to be honest with each other. If something hurts you, tell me. If I don't understand something, I will ask. And if we disagree, let us not disappear from one another's lives because of it."

Vaasanthi felt a wave of emotion rise inside her.

It was not a promise that everything would be easy.

It was a promise that they would try to speak.

And after fifteen years, that felt like a beginning.

"All right, Daddy."

He breathed out slowly.

"Thank you for calling me."

The simplicity of the words overwhelmed her.

"Thank you for answering."

Kishan gave a small, broken laugh.

"I would have answered any call from you, Vaasu."

She did not know what to say.

He continued.

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"I don't know how many times I imagined hearing your voice. Sometimes I would think about what I would say if you called. I had so many things planned in my mind."

"What were they?"

He laughed softly.

"Now that you have called, I cannot remember half of them."

Vaasanthi laughed through her tears.

"That is exactly what happened to me."

For the first time, the laughter between them did not feel borrowed from an old photograph.

It belonged to the present.

Before they ended the call, Kishan asked, "May I call you sometime?"

Vaasanthi thought for a moment.

"Yes, Daddy."

"Whenever you are comfortable?"

"Yes."

"And if you need time, you can tell me."

"I will."

He paused.

"Good night, Vaasu."

"Good night, Daddy."

She nearly ended the call.

Then she stopped.

There was one more thing she wanted to say.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, my child?"

She held the phone tightly.

"I am glad I called."

The silence that followed was different from every silence that had come before it.

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It was full of emotion, relief, and the fragile happiness of two people who had finally allowed themselves to speak.

"So am I, Vaasu," he said.

And then the call ended.

Vaasanthi sat motionless on her bed.

The phone was still in her hand.

She could not believe she had spoken to her father.

She had heard his voice. She had asked him questions. She had told him that she missed him.

And he had listened.

He had not demanded that she forgive him. He had not told her that she had misunderstood everything. He had not blamed her for the years that had passed.

He had answered as honestly as he could, at least from what she had heard.

She knew the conversation had not resolved everything.

She still needed to hear her mother's side without fear or interruption. She needed to understand more about the disagreements that had led to the separation. She needed to meet Kishan before she could begin to know the man he had become.

But something fundamental had changed.

For fifteen years, her father had existed in her life as a question she had never been permitted to ask.

Now he was a person she could speak to.

She looked at the photograph.

The little girl was smiling.

Vaasanthi lifted it gently.

"Daddy," she whispered, "I spoke to you."

She began to cry again.

But these tears were not only tears of sadness.

They were tears of release.

She had carried an unanswered question for so long that she had forgotten what it felt like to ask it aloud.

Now, at last, she had begun.

Radha was standing near the kitchen when Vaasanthi came out of her room.

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

Vaasanthi stopped.

The question was so ordinary that, for a moment, she almost answered automatically.

Then she looked at her mother.

"Not yet, Amma."

"Come and eat. It is getting late."

Vaasanthi walked to the dining table.

Radha served her dinner and sat opposite her.

For a few minutes, they ate quietly.

Vaasanthi wanted to tell her about the call.

She wanted to explain that she had not called Kishan to prove Radha wrong. She had not called because she believed her mother had lied to her. She had called because she had spent years living with questions, and she could no longer ignore the possibility that the answers might help her understand her own life.

But she knew this conversation would require care.

Her father had given her his version of events. It was important, but it was not the whole story.

Her mother deserved the opportunity to speak, too.

Vaasanthi placed her spoon down.

"Amma, can we talk tomorrow?"

Radha looked up.

"About what?"

"About Daddy."

The colour seemed to drain from Radha's face.

"Why are you bringing him up again?"

"Because I want to talk to you about what happened."

"I have already told you what you need to know."

"Amma, I don't think I know everything."

Radha put her spoon down.

"What do you mean?"

Vaasanthi took a breath.

"I spoke to him."

The words fell between them.

Radha stared at her.

For several seconds, she did not move.

Then she stood up.

"You spoke to him?"

"Yes, Amma."

"When?"

"This evening."

Radha looked as though she had been struck by something she had not seen coming.

"You went behind my back?"

Vaasanthi felt the accusation land heavily.

"I didn't do it to hurt you."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted to understand what happened."

"What I told you was not enough?"

Vaasanthi's heart ached.

"Amma, I am not saying that your pain was not real. I am not saying that Daddy was right about everything. I just wanted to hear him speak for himself."

Radha's eyes filled with tears.

"And what did he tell you? That I was responsible for everything? That he was innocent?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"He told me that he made mistakes. He told me that he wished he had handled some things differently. He told me he wanted to speak to you."

Radha looked away.

Vaasanthi continued carefully.

"He didn't ask me to blame you. He didn't ask me to choose his side. He said you had your own feelings and that he had made mistakes too."

For a moment, Radha seemed unable to respond.

Then she shook her head.

"You don't know what happened between us, Vaasanthi."

"You're right, Amma. I don't. That is why I want to understand."

Radha's voice broke.

"And you think one phone call will tell you everything?"

"No. I don't."

"Then what do you expect to achieve?"

Vaasanthi took a slow breath.

"I don't expect one phone call to repair fifteen years. But it has helped me begin to understand that I may not have known the whole story."

Radha turned away.

Vaasanthi felt a sudden urge to reach for her mother's hand, but she did not.

She understood that Radha was hurt.

And she also understood that her mother's hurt did not mean she had to abandon her own search for understanding.

"Amma," she said gently, "I am still your daughter. Nothing about this call changes that."

Radha did not turn around.

Vaasanthi continued.

"I love you. I know what you have done for me. I know how much you have sacrificed. I am not trying to take anything away from you."

Her voice trembled.

"But I missed having a father. And I don't want to spend the rest of my life wondering whether I could have known him."

Radha stood very still.

Vaasanthi wiped her eyes.

"I am not asking you to forgive him tonight. I am not asking you to meet him tomorrow. I am only asking you to let me understand."

Radha remained silent.

For a moment, Vaasanthi thought she might say something.

Instead, her mother walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Vaasanthi stood alone in the dining room.

The house was quiet.

She had known this might happen.

She had known that her mother might feel betrayed, that the conversation might hurt her, and that the truth would not arrive without consequences.

Yet, for the first time, Vaasanthi did not interpret the silence as a command to abandon what she believed was right.

She had taken a step towards her father.

Now she had to give her mother time to face what that step meant.

She could not force Radha to understand everything in one evening.

She could not demand that she change her feelings.

But she could remain honest about her own.

Vaasanthi went to her room and sat beside the photograph.

The day had been full of tears.

She had cried when she heard her father's voice. She had cried when he called her his child. She had cried when she told him that she missed him.

And now she cried because her mother was hurting.

For years, she had believed that caring about one person meant betraying another.

Now she was beginning to understand that love did not always fit into such simple divisions.

She could love her mother and still want to know her father.

She could acknowledge her father's longing and still recognize the pain caused by his absence.

She could understand her mother's hurt without agreeing that silence should decide the rest of her life.

These truths were difficult to hold together.

But perhaps growing up meant learning to hold them without allowing one to erase the other.

She looked at the photograph again.

The little girl was still sitting on her father's shoulders.

For the first time, Vaasanthi no longer saw the photograph only as evidence of something she had lost.

She saw it as evidence that something had once existed.

And if something had once existed, perhaps there was a chance—not a guarantee, but a chance—that a new relationship could grow from what remained.

Not the same relationship.

Not a return to the childhood she had missed.

Something different.

Something built by two people who had grown older, who carried their own memories, and who now had an opportunity to speak.

She placed the photograph beside her phone.

Then she whispered the words she had been unable to say for fifteen years.

"Good night, Daddy."

Outside, the night settled over the house.

In one room, a father was probably replaying a phone call he had imagined for years.

In another, a mother was struggling with the return of a past she had tried to leave behind.

And between them was a daughter who had finally stopped treating the truth as something she had to fear.

The phone call had not brought the family together.

It had not erased the past.

It had not settled who was right or wrong.

But it had done something important.

It had replaced a lifetime of unanswered questions with the beginning of a conversation.

And sometimes, that is how a relationship begins to return—not with a grand reunion, not with an immediate apology, and not with every wound suddenly healed.

It begins when one person finally says hello.

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And the other person answers.

Chapter 12:

The morning after Vaasanthi spoke to her father, the house woke up as it always did.

The pressure cooker whistled in the kitchen. The milk packet lay outside the front door. A newspaper boy threw the newspaper onto the veranda with the accuracy of someone who had performed the same task for years. From the neighbouring house came the familiar sound of a radio playing an old song.

Everything was ordinary.

Except for Radha.

She prepared breakfast without speaking to Vaasanthi. When her daughter entered the kitchen, she moved towards the other side of the counter. When Vaasanthi asked whether she wanted tea, Radha shook her head without looking at her.

There was no argument.

No accusation.

No raised voice.

Only a silence that seemed to have settled deliberately into every corner of the house.

Vaasanthi understood it.

Her mother was hurt.

Perhaps she felt betrayed. Perhaps she believed that the daughter she had raised and protected had crossed a boundary she had never expected her to cross. Perhaps the phone call had brought back memories that Radha had spent fifteen years trying to keep at a distance.

Vaasanthi could understand all of that.

What she could not do was pretend that the conversation with her father had never happened.

She had made a choice, and she had to accept the consequences of that choice.

"Amma, I am leaving for work," she said, standing near the dining table.

Radha continued arranging the plates.

"I'll be late today. We have an interview in the evening."

There was no response.

Vaasanthi waited for a moment.

Then she picked up her handbag and left.

Outside, the morning sun had begun to warm the street. She walked towards the main road, trying to keep her thoughts on the day ahead.

She had faced difficult situations before. She had reported accidents, spoken to distressed families, and questioned officials who refused to answer straightforward questions. She had learned to remain calm when people became angry.

But this silence was different.

She could not report it.

She could not ask an expert to explain it.

She could not stand before a camera and tell the world what was happening inside her own home.

She could only live through it.

And for the first time, Vaasanthi realized that understanding a problem intellectually did not make it easy to endure emotionally.

The first day passed without a proper conversation.

Radha asked whether Vaasanthi wanted more rice at dinner. Vaasanthi said no. Radha asked whether she would be coming home late the following day. Vaasanthi answered that she was not sure.

Those were the only words they exchanged.

Vaasanthi tried not to force a conversation.

She knew that her mother needed time, and she did not want to turn a difficult moment into another argument. But she also knew that silence could become a comfortable hiding place, allowing people to avoid the very conversations that might help them understand one another.

She had spent years observing that pattern in others.

Now she was experiencing it in her own home.

That night, she sat beside her window with her phone in her hand.

Her father's number was saved.

She wanted to call him again. She wanted to ask whether he had slept well, whether he had eaten, whether he was all right after their emotional conversation.

The questions seemed absurdly ordinary.

Yet she realized that this was how relationships were built.

Not only through dramatic conversations about the past, but through the small exchanges that made two people part of each other's everyday lives.

Did you eat?

How was your day?

Are you home?

Did something happen at work?

These questions might seem insignificant to people who asked them every day.

To Vaasanthi, they represented fifteen years of conversations that had never taken place.

She typed a message in whatsup...

Daddy, I hope you are doing well. I was thinking about our conversation yesterday.

She read it twice.

Then she sent it.

A few minutes later, his reply arrived.

I am doing well, Vaasu. I have been thinking about our conversation too. Thank you for calling me. Take care of yourself, my child.

Vaasanthi smiled.

She placed the phone beside her and looked towards the photograph.

The past was still painful.

But for the first time, she was no longer alone with it.

On the second day, the silence became harder to ignore.

Radha had always been a woman of routine. She liked her kitchen organized, her bills arranged in a particular drawer, and her daughter's meals prepared even when Vaasanthi returned home late. She remembered small details about Vaasanthi's preferences and often complained that her daughter forgot to take care of herself.

Now she continued doing all those things.

She prepared Vaasanthi's breakfast.

She kept dinner ready.

She folded the clothes that had been left to dry.

But she did everything without the warmth that had once accompanied those ordinary acts.

It was as though Radha had decided that she would continue performing the duties of a mother while withdrawing the privilege of being a companion.

Vaasanthi found this more painful than she had expected.

She could have handled anger. An argument would have given her something to respond to. She could have explained herself, listened to her mother's objections, and tried to make her intentions clear.

But silence gave her nothing.

It left her standing outside a closed door, uncertain whether knocking would help or make things worse.

That evening, she returned home carrying a small box of sweets.

Radha looked at it.

"What is that?"

"I bought some sweets on the way home. I thought you might like them."

"I don't want any."

Vaasanthi placed the box on the dining table.

"All right, Amma."

She went to her room.

A few minutes later, she heard Radha open the box.

Vaasanthi smiled faintly.

It was a small thing, but it reassured her that her mother had not stopped caring altogether.

Perhaps affection had not disappeared.

Perhaps it was simply buried beneath the hurt.

She reminded herself that Radha was allowed to feel hurt. Vaasanthi had made a decision that affected both of them, and her mother had not yet found a way to process it.

But she also reminded herself of something equally important.

Radha's pain could explain her silence without making silence the only possible response.

Vaasanthi had not called Kishan to punish her mother. She had called because she wanted to know her father. That desire was not an act of cruelty.

She could acknowledge the pain her decision had caused without surrendering the decision itself.

For years, she had believed that keeping everyone comfortable was a way of protecting relationships.

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Now she was beginning to understand that a relationship could not remain healthy if one person had to hide an important part of their life to prevent the other from becoming upset.

Love required consideration.

But it also required honesty.

On the third day, Ravi noticed that something was wrong.

They had returned to the office after recording an interview with a young entrepreneur who had built a successful business after several failures. Vaasanthi was reviewing the footage when Ravi placed a cup of tea beside her.

"You haven't said anything for the last hour."

"I am working."

"You can work and talk at the same time. You have done it for two years."

She smiled weakly.

Ravi pulled a chair towards her desk.

"Is everything all right at home?"

Vaasanthi looked at him.

"My mother is not speaking to me."

"Because you spoke to your father?"

She nodded.

Ravi remained quiet for a moment.

"How long has it been?"

"Three days."

"And how are you handling it?"

"I don't know."

She looked down at the papers in front of her.

"I understand that she is hurt. I know the call was difficult for her. But I don't know what I am supposed to do now. Should I apologize? Should I promise not to speak to him again? Should I wait until she is ready to talk?"

Ravi listened without interrupting.

"I don't want to hurt her," Vaasanthi continued. "She has done so much for me. I know how much she sacrificed. Sometimes I feel guilty for even wanting to know my father."

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Ravi leaned forward.

"Let me ask you something. If you had not called him, would your mother have been happier?"

"Perhaps."

"And would you have been happy?"

Vaasanthi did not answer.

"Would you have stopped wondering about him?"

"No."

"Would the questions have disappeared?"

"No."

Ravi nodded.

"Then you have to distinguish between causing someone pain and doing something wrong."

Vaasanthi looked at him.

"Those are not always the same thing," he continued. "Sometimes a decision hurts someone we love, even when the decision itself is reasonable. You have to consider their feelings, but you cannot make every important decision based only on whether someone will be upset."

He paused.

"Did you call your father to hurt your mother?"

"No."

"Did you call him to prove that she was wrong?"

"No."

"Why did you call him?"

Vaasanthi took a breath.

"Because I wanted to know him. Because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life wondering what might have happened if I had spoken to him."

Ravi nodded.

"Then don't forget that reason just because the consequences are uncomfortable."

Vaasanthi was silent.

"I am not telling you to ignore your mother's feelings," he added. "You should listen to her. You should give her time. But listening to her does not mean that you must erase your own feelings."

She looked at him for a long moment.

"Sometimes you say things that sound so simple."

"They are simple."

"Then why are they so difficult to follow?"

Ravi smiled.

"Because knowing what is right and doing what is right are two different jobs."

Vaasanthi laughed softly.

"There is the philosopher again."

"Of course. I have been working with you for two years. My development is inevitable."

For a moment, she felt lighter.

Then Ravi became serious again.

"Vaasanthi, you have spent so much of your life trying not to be the reason anyone gets hurt. But you cannot build every relationship by making yourself smaller. Your mother matters. Your father matters. And you matter too."

The words stayed with her long after Ravi returned to his work.

And you matter too.

She had never thought of it that way.

She had thought of herself as the child caught between two adults, the daughter who had to choose carefully, the person who had to avoid making the situation worse.

She had not fully considered that she was also the person who had lost something.

She had lost years with her father.

She had lost the opportunity to form her own understanding of him.

And she had spent a long time carrying the consequences of a conflict she had been too young to influence.

Wanting to understand that loss was not selfish.

It was human.

That evening, Vaasanthi came home with a decision.

She would speak to her mother once more.

Not to demand an answer. Not to force her to forgive Kishan.

Not to argue about who had been responsible for the separation.

She would simply tell Radha what the silence was doing to their relationship.

She found her mother sitting in the living room, folding clothes.

"Amma, can I sit with you for a while?"

Radha did not look up.

"If you want."

Vaasanthi sat beside her.

For a few moments, neither spoke.

Then Vaasanthi began.

"Amma, I know you are hurt because I spoke to Daddy."

Radha continued folding the clothes.

"I am not asking you to be happy about it. I am not asking you to forgive him. I just want you to understand why I did it."

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There was no response.

"I spent fifteen years believing that I knew what had happened. I believed that Daddy had left us and that there was no point in trying to understand anything more. But as I grew older, I began wondering whether I had heard only one part of the story."

Radha placed a folded saree on the pile.

"Your father has told you his version," she said at last.

"Yes."

"And you believe him?"

"I believe that he has told me what he remembers and feels. I have not decided that everything he says is right."

Radha looked at her for the first time.

Vaasanthi continued.

"I want to hear your side too, Amma. I want to understand what you went through. I want to know why you made the decisions you made. I am not asking you to defend yourself. I am asking you to let me understand you."

Radha's expression changed slightly.

For a moment, Vaasanthi thought she might finally speak openly.

Instead, Radha asked, "What if understanding me makes you hate him?"

"I don't want to hate anyone, Amma."

"What if you discover that he was responsible for everything?"

"Then I will have to understand that too."

"And what if you discover that I made mistakes?"

Vaasanthi was quiet for a moment.

"Then I will have to understand that too."

Radha looked away.

Vaasanthi reached for her mother's hand.

Radha did not pull away, but she did not hold it either.

"Amma, I am not asking you to change your memories. I am not asking you to pretend that the past was easy. I only want to know the truth as best I can."

Radha's eyes filled with tears.

"You don't understand how much I suffered."

"Then tell me, Amma."

The words were gentle.

"Tell me what happened. Tell me what hurt you. Tell me what you wish had been different. I will listen."

Radha looked at her daughter.

For a moment, something almost broke through her expression.

Then she withdrew her hand.

"Not now, Vaasanthi."

She stood up and carried the folded clothes into the bedroom.

The door closed.

Vaasanthi remained seated.

She had tried again.

Her mother was not ready.

She felt disappointed, but she did not feel defeated.

Perhaps Radha needed more time than three days. Perhaps the thought of Kishan returning to their lives was too painful to discuss. Perhaps she feared that listening to his explanation would weaken the certainty that had helped her survive the separation.

Vaasanthi could not know.

She would not invent an explanation simply because her mother had not given her one.

But she could wait without withdrawing her own decision.

She could remain available for a conversation without insisting that it happen immediately.

She could love her mother without agreeing that the past should remain permanently sealed.

For the first time, Vaasanthi understood that patience did not have to mean surrender.

Sometimes patience meant leaving a door open. The fourth morning arrived quietly.

Vaasanthi woke before her alarm.

For a moment, she lay still, listening to the familiar sounds of the house. She could hear Radha moving around in the kitchen.

Three days had passed since she had spoken to her father.

Three days since the house had become a place where ordinary words were exchanged only when necessary.

Vaasanthi had tried not to let the silence change the way she behaved towards her mother. She continued asking whether Radha needed anything from the market. She made tea when she woke early. She told her mother when she would return from work.

She had not stopped being a daughter. But she had also not promised to stop being Kishan's daughter.

That distinction had become important to her.She got ready for work and stepped into the kitchen.

Radha was standing near the stove.

"Good morning, Amma."

Radha looked at her and said, "Good morning."

The reply was quiet, but it was the first greeting that had sounded almost normal in four days.

Vaasanthi felt a small hope rise inside her. She poured herself a glass of water.

"Amma, I may return a little late today. We are recording an interview outside the office."

"All right."

Radha turned off the stove.

"Vaasanthi, sit down for a moment."

Her daughter stopped. Something in her mother's voice told her that this was not an ordinary request.

She placed the glass on the counter and sat at the dining table.

Radha remained standing for a few seconds, wiping her hands with a towel. Then she came and sat opposite her.

Neither spoke immediately.....Vaasanthi waited.

At last, Radha said, "I cannot continue like this."

Vaasanthi looked at her.

"The silence in this house..." Radha stopped and pressed her lips together. "I cannot tolerate it anymore."

Her eyes were already filling with tears.

"I cannot bear to see you sitting in your room without speaking to me. I cannot bear to eat dinner without hearing you tell me about your work. I cannot bear to go to bed knowing that we are living in the same house and behaving as though we are strangers."

Vaasanthi felt her throat tighten.

"Amma..."

Radha raised her hand gently, asking her to wait.

"I have thought about this for three days. I have been angry with you. I have felt hurt that you went behind my back and spoke to him. I have wondered whether you believe that I have kept you away from your father without reason."

"I don't believe that you had no reason, Amma."

"But you have decided to speak to him."

"Yes."

Radha looked down.

"And I know I cannot stop you from wanting to know him."

Vaasanthi remained silent.

Radha took a shaky breath.

"I don't want to lose you too, Vaasanthi."

The words were so unexpected that Vaasanthi could not respond.

Radha continued.

"You are my daughter. You are the person I have lived for all these years. I raised you. I watched you grow up. I worried about you, celebrated your achievements, and stayed awake when you came home late. I have built my life around you."

She wiped her eyes.

"I know you are an adult now. I know you have your own thoughts and decisions. But when you told me you had spoken to your father, I felt as though something I had tried to protect for fifteen years was slipping away from me."

Vaasanthi's eyes filled.

"Amma, I am not leaving you."

"I know that now. But I was afraid."

For the first time in four days, Radha was not speaking through silence.

She was speaking through fear.

Vaasanthi could hear the pain beneath her words.

Perhaps her mother had not simply been angry about the call. Perhaps she had been afraid of losing her daughter's affection, afraid of being judged, afraid of reopening a chapter she had never fully understood how to close.

Vaasanthi reached across the table.

"Amma, nothing can take away what you have been to me."

Radha looked at her.

"You are my mother. You always will be."

A tear rolled down Radha's cheek.

"But Daddy is my father too. I cannot change that, Amma. I cannot pretend that I don't want to know him."

Radha lowered her head.

"I know."

They remained quiet for a few moments.

Then Radha spoke again.

"If you want me to forgive you for speaking to him, I will."

Vaasanthi looked at her in surprise.

"Forgive me?"

"Yes."

"Why do you have to forgive me, Amma?"

Radha seemed taken aback by the question.

"Because you did something that hurt me."

Vaasanthi took a slow breath.

"Did I do something wrong by wanting to speak to my father?"

Radha opened her mouth, then closed it.

Vaasanthi continued gently.

"I understand that the call hurt you. I am sorry that you were hurt. But I did not call him to insult you, Amma. I called him because I wanted to understand what happened. I wanted to know him. I wanted to stop wondering whether one conversation might have changed something."

Radha wiped her face.

"I know that is what you believe."

"It is not only what I believe. It is what I feel."

Vaasanthi paused.

"And I don't want to spend the rest of my life carrying the guilt of never having tried."

Radha looked at her daughter.

Vaasanthi's voice became softer.

"I don't want to reach an age when I look back and ask myself why I never made an effort to understand my father. I don't want to keep wondering whether a small step from me could have helped rebuild a relationship."

She held her mother's gaze.

"I want to know that I tried, Amma. I want to know that I gave the relationship an opportunity."

Radha's expression changed.

Perhaps she recognized the seriousness in her daughter's voice.

Perhaps she realized that this was no passing curiosity that would disappear if she refused to discuss it.

Vaasanthi was no longer the little girl who had accepted every explanation simply because she had no other way of knowing.

She was a woman who had begun thinking for herself.

Radha took a deep breath.

"All right," she said at last. "I will not stop you from speaking to him."

Vaasanthi felt a wave of relief.

But then Radha added, "I will forgive you on one condition."

Vaasanthi's heart sank slightly.

"What condition, Amma?"

"Do not speak to him again."

The words were spoken quietly.

There was no anger in them now. Only a desperate hope that, by asking for this one thing, Radha could restore the life she understood.

Vaasanthi stared at her mother.

For a moment, she was unable to speak.

She had expected a difficult conversation. She had expected questions, objections, perhaps even accusations.

She had not expected this.

Radha continued, her voice trembling.

"I am willing to put this behind us. I am willing to forget that you called him. We can return to how things were before. We can live peacefully again. You and I can go on with our lives."

Vaasanthi looked down at the table.

She also wanted the Return to how things were before.

She knew that her mother meant it as an offer of peace. But what would that peace cost?

It would mean pretending that the phone call had not mattered.

It would mean ignoring the man who had called her *my child*.

It would mean returning to a life in which her father's existence was something she was expected not to acknowledge.

And it would mean carrying the knowledge that she had found a door, opened it, and then deliberately closed it because someone she loved was afraid of what lay beyond it.

Vaasanthi looked up and said,"Amma, can I ask you something?"

Radha nodded.

"You said you will forgive me if I stop speaking to Daddy."

"Yes."

"And you said you are willing to take a step back so that we can live peacefully again."

Radha frowned slightly.

"What is wrong with that?"

"Nothing is wrong with wanting peace, Amma. I want peace too."

Vaasanthi paused for a moment and said, "But I want to understand something."

Radha waited.

"If taking one step back can help us improve our relationship, why couldn't you take that same step back with Daddy fifteen years ago?"

The question entered the room softly. It did not arrive as an accusation shouted in anger.

It came from a daughter who had spent fifteen years trying to understand why a relationship had disappeared from her life.

Radha stared at her.

Vaasanthi continued, her eyes filling.

"If you can tell me today that you are willing to put aside your hurt because you don't want to lose me, why couldn't you do something similar with him then?"

Radha's lips parted.....No words came.

"Amma, I am not saying that you were the only person responsible for what happened. I don't know everything that happened between you. I know Daddy made mistakes. He told me that himself."

She wiped her eyes.

"But if both of you were hurt, if both of you were angry, if both of you were waiting for the other person to understand... why did nobody take that one step back?"

Radha looked away.

Vaasanthi's voice trembled.

"Why did nobody say, 'We are hurting each other. Let us stop for a moment and talk'?"

The room was silent.... Vaasanthi could hear the clock ticking on the wall.

She had imagined this question many times, but she had never imagined asking it while sitting opposite her mother at the dining table.

She had never wanted to hurt Radha.

Yet she could not avoid the question simply because the answer might be painful.

"Amma," she whispered, "if you had taken that one step back fifteen years ago, perhaps I would have had my father's affection throughout my childhood."

Radha closed her eyes.

Vaasanthi continued, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Perhaps I would have had both of you at my school functions. Perhaps I would have had someone to call when I needed advice from my father. Perhaps I would have grown up knowing him instead of spending years wondering why he wasn't there."

Her voice broke.

"I am not saying everything would have been perfect. I know relationships are complicated. But perhaps things could have been different if one of you had tried to understand the other before the silence became permanent."

Radha began to cry.

Vaasanthi reached for her hand.

"I don't want to blame you, Amma. I don't want to blame Daddy for everything either. I just don't want us to repeat the same thing again."

She held her mother's hand gently.

"You are asking me to give up the chance of knowing my father so that we can avoid feeling hurt today. But what if that means I spend the rest of my life carrying a hurt that could have been avoided?"

Radha's shoulders trembled.

"What if, twenty years from now, I ask myself why I did not make another phone call? Why I did not try to meet him? Why I let the fear of upsetting you decide the relationship I would have with my father?"

Vaasanthi took a shaky breath and said, "I don't want that guilt, Amma."

She looked directly into her mother's eyes. She said again, "And I don't want you to carry it either."

Radha stared at her daughter.

For the first time in fifteen years, she seemed unable to defend the silence that had separated her from Kishan.

Not because Vaasanthi had proved that every decision Radha had made was wrong. Not because the past had suddenly become simple.

But because her daughter had asked a question that reached beyond blame.

If a small act of understanding could protect the bond between a mother and daughter today, why had such an act seemed impossible when the marriage between Radha and Kishan was falling apart?

Radha had no immediate answer.

She had spent years remembering the hurt Kishan had caused her. She had remembered the arguments, the words that wounded her, the moments when she felt that he did not understand her.

Perhaps she had also remembered the moments when she had been right to feel hurt.

But she had rarely allowed herself to consider the cost of the silence that followed.

Now she was looking at that cost. It had not fallen on Kishan alone. It had fallen on Vaasanthi.

A little girl had grown up without her father, not because she had chosen to reject him, but because the adults in her life had never managed to create a way for her to know him.

And now that girl, grown into a woman, was asking her mother why she should be expected to repeat the same silence.

Radha lowered her head and called, "Vaasanthi..."

Her voice was barely audible.....Vaasanthi waited.

Radha tried to speak again, but the words did not come.

For fifteen years, she had believed that refusing to speak to Kishan was a way of protecting herself from

further hurt. Perhaps it had been. Perhaps there had been moments when distance was the only way she

knew to preserve her dignity.

But somewhere along the way, the distance had become permanent.

She had stopped asking whether the silence was still protecting her or whether it was simply continuing

because neither of them knew how to end it.

Now her daughter was asking her to look at that question.

Not to deny the pain she had experienced.

Not to accept all the blame.

Only to consider whether the silence had taken more than it had given.

Radha covered her face with her hands and began to sob. Vaasanthi moved around the table and sat beside her.

"Amma..."

Radha leaned towards her daughter. For a few moments, they held each other without speaking.

Then Radha whispered, "I never wanted you to suffer."

Vaasanthi closed her eyes and said, "I know, Amma."

"I wanted to protect you."

"I know."

"I thought it would be easier if we did not keep bringing everything back."

Vaasanthi gently stroked her mother's hand.

"But it never really went away, did it?"

Radha shook her head.

"No."

The word was almost inaudible. They remained together for a long time.

No one was declaring victory. No one was being forced to surrender.

There was only a mother and daughter, both crying over years that could not be restored, both beginning to understand that the silence they had inherited from the past did not have to dictate their future.

After some time, Radha wiped her face and sat up.

"Does he want to speak to me?" she asked.

Vaasanthi looked at her mother.

"Yes, Amma."

"Did he say that?"

"He said he would like to speak to you. He said he would apologize for the hurt he caused and listen to you."

Radha looked down at her hands.

"After all these years..."

"Yes."

She was quiet for a while.

Then she asked, "What did you tell him?"

"I told him I wanted to understand him. I told him I didn't want us to begin another relationship based on silence."

Radha nodded slowly.

"And what did he say?"

"He agreed."

For several seconds, Radha did not speak.

Then she looked at Vaasanthi.

"Would you be willing to arrange a conversation between us?"

Vaasanthi felt her heart leap.

"Yes, Amma."

"But not today," Radha added quickly. "I need some time to think. I need to understand what I want to say to him."

"Of course."

"And I don't want you to think that I am agreeing because I believe he was right about everything."

"I don't think that, Amma."

"I still have things that hurt me. There are things I may never agree with him about."

"You don't have to agree with everything he says."

Radha looked at her daughter.

"But I don't want to spend the rest of my life being unable to speak to him because of those things."

Vaasanthi's eyes filled again.

Radha took her hand.

"I cannot promise that I will be able to forgive everything immediately. I cannot promise that one conversation will change how I feel. But I can try to speak to him."

Vaasanthi nodded.

"That is all I am asking, Amma. An opportunity."

Radha looked towards the window.

"Perhaps I should have thought about this long ago."

Vaasanthi did not answer immediately.

She knew that her mother was finally looking back at the past in a way she had not allowed herself to do before.

There was no need to push her further.

After a while, Vaasanthi said, "We cannot change what happened then, Amma. But we can decide what happens now."

Radha turned towards her.

For the first time in four days, she smiled. It was a small, tired smile, touched by tears.

"You have become very wise."

Vaasanthi laughed softly.

"No, Amma. I am still learning."

Radha pulled her daughter into an embrace.

"I am sorry I stopped speaking to you."

Vaasanthi held her tightly.

"I am sorry that my decision hurt you."

They remained together for a few moments. Then Radha drew back and looked at her daughter.

"But don't ask me to do everything in one day."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"I won't."

"And don't expect me to suddenly become a different person."

"I don't expect that either."

Radha shook her head affectionately.

"Good. Because I am still your mother."

Vaasanthi laughed through her tears.

"That is something I have never doubted."

That evening, Vaasanthi called Kishan.

She did not want to tell him that everything had been resolved. It had not. She did not want to create expectations that might make the next conversation more difficult.

She simply wanted to tell him that a door had opened.

He answered after the second ring.

"Hello, Vaasu."

"Hello, Daddy."

"How are you, my child?"

"I am fine. How are you?"

"I am well."

She smiled.

The question was becoming familiar.

"Daddy, I spoke to Amma today."

There was a pause for some time. Then kishan asked, "How is she?"

"She is all right. We spoke about you."

Kishan took a breath.

"What did she say?"

"She has agreed to speak to you."

The silence that followed was so complete that Vaasanthi checked whether the call had disconnected.

"Daddy?"

"I am here, Vaasu."

His voice was unsteady.

"She has agreed?"

"Yes."

For several seconds, he did not speak.

Then he asked, "Are you sure she wants to speak to me?"

"Yes, Daddy. She said she needs a little time, but she is willing to try."

Kishan exhaled slowly.

"Thank you, Vaasu."

"You don't have to thank me, Daddy."

"I do."

His voice became emotional.

"You have done something I had hoped for over so many years."

Vaasanthi felt her throat tighten.

"But please don't think everything is settled," she said. "Amma still has things she wants to say. She is still hurt. You will have to listen to her."

"I understand."

"And she may not agree with everything you say."

"I understand that too."

"And you must not turn the conversation into an argument."

Kishan gave a small laugh.

"You sound like your mother."

Vaasanthi laughed.

"Perhaps I do."

Then his voice softened.

"I will try, Vaasu. I cannot promise that I will find the right words for everything. But I will try to listen."

"That is all I want, Daddy."

He paused.

"And thank you for not giving up on me."

Vaasanthi closed her eyes.

For years, she had thought of herself as the person who had been abandoned.

Now she was hearing her father thank her for not giving up on him.

She did not know how to respond to the depth of that moment.

Finally, she said, "I am not giving up on you, Daddy. But I want us to do this properly. We cannot recover fifteen years in a day."

"No, my child. We cannot."

"But we can start."

Kishan's voice trembled.

"Yes, Vaasu. We can start."

Later that night, Radha came into Vaasanthi's room.

Her daughter was sitting at her desk, reviewing the notes for an upcoming interview.

"Are you busy?" Radha asked.

Vaasanthi looked up immediately.

"No, Amma. Come in."

Radha sat on the edge of the bed.

For a moment, she looked around the room. Her eyes rested on the photograph of Vaasanthi sitting on Kishan's shoulders.

She had seen that photograph many times before.

But tonight, she looked at it differently.

"How old were you there?" she asked.

"Perhaps four or five."

Radha nodded.

"You were very fond of your father."

Vaasanthi looked at the photograph.

"I don't remember everything. But I think I was."

"You were."

Radha's voice softened.

"He used to carry you everywhere. Even when I told him you were old enough to walk, he would say that carrying you made him happy."

Vaasanthi smiled faintly.

"Malathi Atta told me about the shoes he bought me."

Radha gave a small laugh.

"He bought the wrong size, of course."

They looked at each other.

For a moment, the room filled with the memory of a time when the subject of Kishan did not have to be approached with fear.

Radha touched the photograph.

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"I had forgotten how happy you looked."

Vaasanthi's eyes filled.

"Sometimes I look at this photograph and wonder how things changed so much."

Radha lowered her hand.

"So do I."

There was no defence in her voice.

No accusation.

Only regret.

Vaasanthi moved closer and rested her head on her mother's shoulder.

"Amma, I don't want you to feel that I am choosing him over you."

Radha put her arm around her daughter.

"I know."

"I don't want to lose you while trying to know him."

"You won't lose me, Vaasanthi."

Radha paused.

"But I may need time to understand how to live with this change."

"I understand."

"And perhaps I will say things that hurt you while I am trying to understand."

Vaasanthi smiled gently.

"Then we will talk about them, Amma."

Radha laughed softly.

"You have an answer for everything these days."

"No. I just don't want us to stop speaking."

Radha held her daughter a little closer.

"Neither do I."

They sat together for some time, looking at the photograph.

It was not a complete reconciliation.

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Kishan and Radha had not yet spoken. Their disagreements had not disappeared. The past still contained memories that could hurt them both.

But something had changed.

Radha had agreed to take the first step.

And Vaasanthi had learned that sometimes, the most important thing a person could do was not to win an argument, but to create an opportunity for another conversation.

Before going to bed, Vaasanthi opened her notebook.

She had begun keeping it beside her bed several months earlier, after realizing that the people she interviewed were teaching her lessons she did not want to forget.

She turned to a fresh page and wrote:

I used to believe that taking the first step meant admitting that I was wrong.

She paused.

Then she continued.

Now I understand that taking the first step can simply mean accepting that a relationship matters more than the satisfaction of waiting for the other person to move first.

She looked at the sentence.

It seemed simple.

But she knew how much it had taken for her to understand it.

She had watched a singer call her father after years of silence.

She had heard a composer admit that he had allowed pride to destroy a friendship.

She had listened to a retired teacher explain how siblings could lose years while waiting for one another.

She had spoken to her own father after fifteen years.

And now she had watched her mother move towards a conversation she had once believed impossible.

The lesson was becoming clear.

Taking the first step did not guarantee that a relationship would be restored. It did not erase hurt, settle every disagreement, or make the other person respond in the way one hoped.

But it offered something silence could never offer.

A chance.

A chance to explain.

A chance to listen.

A chance to apologize.

A chance to discover that the other person had been carrying pain too.

And if the other person still refused to respond, then at least one could move forward knowing that a sincere attempt had been made.

Vaasanthi closed the notebook.

She looked once more at the photograph.

For the first time, she was not wondering only why her father had been absent.

She was thinking about what might happen when he returned to her life.

She did not expect everything to be easy.

She did not expect her parents to become the couple they had once been.

She did not even know whether their conversation would lead to forgiveness.

But she was no longer asking whether there was any point in trying.

She knew there was.

Because fifteen years had taught her what silence could take away.

And the past few days had begun teaching her what one conversation could give back.

She switched off the light.

Tomorrow would bring its own questions.

Her mother and father would have to speak.

They would have to listen to one another, perhaps for the first time in many years without allowing the old arguments to decide the conversation before it began.

There would be memories to revisit, apologies to offer, and hurt to acknowledge.

Nothing would be guaranteed.

But the door was open.

And for the first time in fifteen years, both Radha and Kishan had an opportunity to walk towards it.

Vaasanthi closed her eyes.

She had once believed that relationships ended when people stopped loving one another.

Now she understood that sometimes relationships remained broken because people stopped trying to understand one another.

And sometimes, when someone finally found the courage to ask a difficult question, a family could begin to discover that its story was not yet finished.

The silence had lasted fifteen years.

It would not disappear in a single day.

But it had finally been challenged.

And that was where the next chapter of their lives would begin.

Chapter 13:

There are moments in life when the distance between two people is measured not in kilometres, not in the number of cities separating them, and not even in the years they have spent apart.

It is measured by the number of words they have never said to each other.

For Kishan and Radha, that distance had grown for fifteen years.

Fifteen years of anger.

Fifteen years of unanswered questions.

Fifteen years of remembering the same incidents differently.

And fifteen years of waiting for the other person to do something that neither had been willing to do.

Now, after all those years, they had agreed to meet.

But agreement was one thing.

Facing each other was another.

That morning, Vaasanthi woke up earlier than usual. She had barely slept the previous night. Every time she closed her eyes, she imagined the meeting that was about to take place.

Would her father be able to speak without breaking down?

Would her mother listen without allowing the past to overwhelm her?

Would the first few minutes be so uncomfortable that one of them might decide to leave?

And, perhaps most importantly, would they be able to see each other as the people they were now, rather than as the people they remembered from fifteen years ago?

She had spent weeks, perhaps months, learning that relationships could not always be understood from a distance. She had listened to nearly a hundred people describe their victories, disappointments, regrets, and

second chances. She had learned that a person's actions often carried stories that their words had failed to explain.

Yet, when the relationship in question was her own family, all her professional understanding seemed insufficient.

She was not a reporter preparing to interview two people.

She was a daughter who wanted her parents to find their way back to each other.

And that made her afraid.

Kishan had not slept either.

He sat on the edge of his bed, looking at the shirt he had taken out the previous evening. It was a simple, light-blue shirt, one Radha had once liked.

He remembered her standing in front of him years ago, adjusting its collar before he left for work.

"You never know how to dress properly," she had said, pretending to be annoyed.

"And you never know how to let me leave the house without correcting something," he had replied.

She had laughed.

He had laughed.

It was such an ordinary memory that it should not have mattered after fifteen years. Yet he held on to it as if it were something precious that had survived a long journey through darkness.

He had forgotten many arguments. He could no longer remember the exact words exchanged during some of their earliest disagreements. But he remembered the sound of Radha's laughter with painful clarity.

He remembered the way she used to wait for him to return from work.

He remembered how she would tell him little things about her day while preparing dinner.

He remembered how they had once discussed Vaasanthi's future, arguing playfully about whether she would become a doctor, a teacher, or something neither of them could imagine.

And he remembered the day their arguments stopped being ordinary disagreements and became walls.

He had told himself many times that he had tried.

He had called.

He had visited.

He had waited.

But now, after meeting Vaasanthi, he understood something that had taken him fifteen years to recognize.

Trying to reach someone was not the same as reaching them.

Waiting outside a closed door was not the same as finding a way to open it.

And regretting the past was not the same as taking responsibility for it.

He stood up and put on the shirt.

Then he sat down again.

He had rehearsed what he wanted to say to Radha countless times, but every sentence sounded inadequate when spoken aloud.

I am sorry.

Two words.

How could two words carry fifteen years of regret?

How could they explain the emptiness of not knowing whether his daughter had grown taller, whether she had fallen ill, whether she had cried over a disappointment, or whether she had needed her father and found no one to call?

How could they explain the loneliness of remembering a family that continued to exist in his mind but no longer existed in his daily life?

He closed his eyes.

He did not want to win an argument.

He did not want to prove that he had been right.

He did not even want Radha to admit that she had been wrong.

He wanted one chance to tell her that the life they had lost had mattered to him.

And if she allowed him to return, he wanted to spend whatever years remained showing her that his regret was not merely a collection of emotional words.

It was something he was prepared to live by.

Vaasanthi decided that they would meet at home.

She considered arranging a meeting at a restaurant or a quiet public place. It might have made the first encounter easier. But she eventually rejected the idea.

The home had witnessed their separation.

Perhaps it could witness the beginning of their reconciliation too.

She did not want the meeting to become a grand event. There would be no elaborate arrangements, no relatives waiting outside, and no one to offer opinions before the two people concerned had spoken.

Just the three of them.

A father.

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A mother.

A daughter who had spent much of her life wondering what their family might have been if someone had spoken a little sooner.

At around ten in the morning, Vaasanthi heard a knock at the door.

Her heart began beating faster.

She looked at Radha.

Her mother was standing near the window. She had dressed carefully, though she had not said a word about the meeting since agreeing to it.

For a moment, neither mother nor daughter moved.

Then Radha said quietly, "Open the door."

Vaasanthi walked towards it.

Kishan stood outside.

He looked older than she remembered from the photographs she had seen. His hair had thinned, and there were lines around his eyes that had not been there before.

But what struck her most was his expression.

He looked like a man who had arrived at a place he had been dreaming of for years and was terrified that he might be asked to leave before he could step inside.

"Daddy," she said.

The word came naturally.

Kishan's eyes filled immediately.

He tried to smile, but his lips trembled.

"Vaasanthi..."

He stopped.

There were a thousand things he wanted to say to his daughter, but he understood that this morning did not belong to him alone.

He looked past her.

Radha stood a few steps away.

For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

Fifteen years of memories stood between them, invisible but unmistakable.

Kishan lowered his eyes first.

"May I come in, Radha?"

It was such a simple question.

He had once entered that home without asking. He had once known where everything was kept, which chair he preferred, where Radha stored the extra cups, and how the morning light fell across the living room floor.

Now he was asking permission to enter a house that had once been his home.

Radha looked at him for a long moment.

Then she moved aside.

"Come in."

Kishan stepped inside.

Vaasanthi closed the door gently.

The sound was small, but to her it felt like the closing of one chapter and the uncertain opening of another.

They sat in the living room.

Radha occupied one end of the sofa. Kishan sat in a chair opposite her. Vaasanthi remained nearby, unsure whether she should sit between them or leave them alone.

Finally, Kishan looked at her.

"Sit down, Ma."

The word *Ma* brought tears to her eyes.

She had heard it in films, in conversations between fathers and daughters, and in the voices of friends talking about their parents.

But hearing it from her own father was different.

It did not erase the years.

It did not compensate for every birthday he had missed or every difficult evening when she had wished he were there.

But it reached a place inside her that had remained untouched for a very long time.

She sat beside Radha.

For a while, the only sound in the room was the ceiling fan turning overhead.

Radha looked at the floor.

Kishan looked at his hands.

Vaasanthi looked at both of them and wondered how many families had reached this exact moment only to retreat into silence because nobody knew how to begin.

She remembered something Dr. Saroja had once told her during an interview.

"The first few minutes of an honest conversation are often the hardest. People have spent years building the walls. They cannot expect the walls to disappear the moment they decide to speak."

Vaasanthi drew a breath.

"Amma, Daddy... I think you both know why we are here."

Radha nodded faintly.

Kishan remained silent.

"I don't want either of you to feel that you have to decide everything today," Vaasanthi continued. "I only wanted you to have an opportunity to speak to each other. Whatever happened between you, I know that I cannot understand the whole story by listening to only one side."

She turned towards her mother.

"And I don't want to take anything away from what you experienced, Amma."

Then she looked at her father.

"And I don't want to assume that I know everything you experienced either."

Her voice trembled.

"I have spent a lot of time thinking about this. I kept asking myself what might have happened if someone had taken one small step earlier. I don't want either of you to spend the rest of your lives wondering about that question."

She paused.

"I cannot make you forgive each other. I cannot make you forget what happened. But I wanted you to have this chance."

She fell silent.

Kishan slowly lifted his head.

"Radha," he began.

His voice cracked on her name.

He stopped, swallowed, and tried again.

"I don't know where to start."

Radha looked at him.

"Then start wherever you can."

Those words gave him just enough courage.

"I'm sorry."

Radha's expression did not change.

Kishan continued.

"I'm sorry for the things I said. I'm sorry for the things I did. I'm sorry for the things I should have done and didn't do. And I'm sorry for the times I thought I was right simply because I could explain my side of the story."

He pressed his palms together, not dramatically, but as if he needed something to hold on to.

"I have spent so many years thinking about what happened between us. Sometimes I felt you had misunderstood me. Sometimes I felt you had not given me a chance. Sometimes I was angry that I couldn't speak to you."

He took a breath.

"But today, I don't want to begin by telling you what you did wrong."

He looked directly at her.

"I want to begin by telling you that I am sorry for my part in what happened."

Radha's eyes moved away from his face.

Kishan continued.

"I know an apology cannot bring back fifteen years. I know I cannot ask you to forget everything just because I have finally been given a chance to speak. And I know that saying I was hurt does not mean you were not hurt."

His voice grew quieter.

"But I want you to know something. I never stopped caring about you."

Radha closed her eyes briefly.

He saw the movement and stopped.

He wanted to reach for her hand. He wanted to ask whether she remembered the first home they had lived in, the little arguments over household expenses, the evenings when they had sat together discussing their plans.

But he did not reach for her.

He had come to listen.

He would not turn his longing into another demand.

"I missed you," he said. "I missed our home. And I missed being Vaasanthi's father."

At that, Vaasanthi lowered her head.

Kishan noticed.

He turned towards his daughter.

"I missed so much of your life, Ma. I don't know what you liked when you were in school. I don't know which subjects were difficult for you, who your friends were, or what you dreamed of becoming when you were little. I don't know how many times you were disappointed and needed someone to tell you that things would be all right."

He stopped to wipe his eyes.

"I wanted to know those things. I wanted to be there. But wanting something and being able to make it happen are not always the same."

He turned back to Radha.

"And I am not saying this to make you feel guilty. I am saying it because I want you to understand what those years meant to me."

Radha had been silent until then.

When she finally spoke, her voice was controlled, but there was pain beneath it.

"You speak as though you were the only person who suffered."

Kishan immediately shook his head.

"No, Radha."

"Do you know what it was like for me?" she asked. "Do you know what it meant to manage everything alone? To make decisions alone? To worry about the future and wonder whether I could handle everything that came my way?"

She looked at him, and for the first time that morning, her voice rose.

"You say you wanted to be there. But I remember the times when I needed you and felt you were not there in the way I needed you to be. I remember feeling that I had to explain myself again and again. I remember the arguments. I remember the hurtful words. I remember feeling that my concerns were being dismissed."

Kishan did not interrupt.

Radha's hands tightened around each other.

"And then we reached a point where every conversation became another argument. I was tired, Kishan. I was tired of explaining, tired of waiting for things to change, tired of feeling that if I did not stand firm, my feelings would never matter."

Her eyes filled.

"You speak about fifteen years of missing us. But do you know how difficult it was to build a life in which I did not have to think about you every day?"

Kishan looked down.

"No," he whispered. "I don't know exactly how difficult it was."

Radha seemed surprised by his answer.

He looked up again.

"I cannot know everything you went through. I wasn't there. And I am sorry for that too."

She stared at him, as though she had prepared herself for a defence and had not expected him to accept the weight of her words.

He continued.

"I may remember some things differently. There may be moments when I want to explain why I said something or why I acted in a particular way. But I don't want to use my explanation to erase your experience."

He paused.

"You were hurt. I need to hear that without immediately telling you why you should not have been hurt."

For the first time that morning, Radha had no immediate reply.

Kishan's words did not solve anything.

But they did something more important.

They allowed her pain to remain in the room without turning it into a competition.

After a few minutes, Radha asked the question that had been waiting inside her for fifteen years.

"If you cared so much, why did you not find a way to reach me?"

Kishan's face changed.

It was the question he had feared, because there was no answer that could make the years acceptable.

"I tried," he said slowly. "I called. I came to see you. I asked people whether you would agree to speak to me."

"I remember."

"But I also stopped trying in some ways."

Radha looked at him.

Kishan took a long breath.

"There were times when I thought, if she doesn't want to speak to me, why should I keep asking? I told myself that I had done enough. I told myself that you should take the next step."

He looked ashamed.

"And perhaps that was my mistake."

Radha remained silent.

"I kept thinking that if I tried again and you refused again, I would have to face the same pain all over again. So I waited. I waited for a message, a call, some sign that you were ready."

He gave a small, sorrowful smile.

"I thought I was protecting myself. But I was also allowing time to pass."

He looked at Vaasanthi.

"And the time that passed was not mine alone. It was hers too."

Vaasanthi's tears began to fall.

Kishan turned back to Radha.

"I should have looked for a better way to communicate. I should have asked whether there was someone you trusted who could help us speak calmly. I should have tried to understand what would make a conversation possible instead of simply waiting for you to agree to the kind of conversation I wanted."

He rubbed his forehead.

"I cannot tell you that I did everything right. I didn't."

He was quiet for a moment.

"But I need you to know that I did not stop caring just because I stopped finding ways to reach you."

Radha's eyes filled further.

"And what about your pride?" she asked. "What about your ego? Were those more important than your family?"

Kishan did not defend himself.

"Sometimes, yes," he said.

The answer was so direct that Radha looked at him in surprise.

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"Sometimes I wanted you to understand my pain before I could understand yours. Sometimes I wanted an apology before I could offer one. Sometimes I believed that if I gave in first, I would be admitting that I was entirely wrong."

He shook his head.

"I understand now that a marriage is not a court where one person has to win and the other has to lose. Even if I had been right about some things, what would I have gained by losing you and Vaasanthi?"

His voice broke.

"What did I gain, Radha?"

Nobody answered.

He did not expect them to.

He looked at her with tears running down his cheeks.

"I am sorry. I am truly sorry."

Then, after a moment, he said it again.

"I'm sorry, Radha."

He did not count the apologies. He did not repeat them to persuade her to forgive him. He said them because the words he had withheld for years had finally found a place where they could be spoken.

"I'm sorry for the days you felt alone. I'm sorry for the times I made you feel unheard. I'm sorry for allowing arguments to become more important than understanding. I'm sorry for the years I spent waiting for you to make the first move."

He looked towards Vaasanthi.

"And I'm sorry for every day my daughter grew up without me beside her."

He lowered his head.

"If I could go back and change one thing, I would not wait so long to try again. I would not let my pride decide how many times I should knock on a door that mattered to me."

He looked at Radha again.

"I cannot change the past. But if you give me a chance, I will not use the past as an excuse to repeat it."

Radha had imagined this conversation many times too.

In some versions, she had shouted at him.

In others, she had calmly listed every mistake he had made.

Sometimes she had imagined him apologizing, and she had pictured herself turning away without a word.

She had believed that if the day ever came, she would know exactly what to say.

But now that Kishan was sitting in front of her, acknowledging things she had wanted him to acknowledge, she discovered that the human heart was not as simple as the mind liked to imagine.

She was still angry.

She was still hurt.

There were memories she could not revisit without feeling the old pain return.

And yet, she was beginning to see something she had not allowed herself to consider for a long time.

Kishan was not asking her to declare that he had been right.

He was not telling her that her hurt was imaginary.

He was not demanding that she forget the past.

He was asking to be heard.

For fifteen years, she had believed that speaking to him would mean opening the door to the same arguments, the same disappointments, and the same emotional exhaustion.

She had feared that one conversation would become a surrender of everything she had stood for.

But the man sitting before her was not trying to win.

He was trying to understand.

Perhaps he had always possessed that capacity and had failed to use it when it mattered.

Perhaps she had also failed to leave room for it.

The thought frightened her.

Because if the truth was more complicated than the story she had told herself, then she would have to look at her own decisions too.

She looked towards Vaasanthi.

Her daughter was wiping her tears quietly.

Radha suddenly felt the full weight of what had happened to the little girl who had once waited for her father.

"Vaasanthi," she said.

Her daughter looked up.

"When you were growing up, did you miss him?"

It was an unexpected question.

Vaasanthi tried to answer, but her throat tightened.

"Yes, Amma."

Radha's face crumpled.

"Even when you didn't speak about him?"

"Yes."

"Even when you told me you were fine?"

Vaasanthi nodded.

Radha covered her mouth with one hand.

All those years, she had thought she was protecting her daughter from the uncertainty and pain of a broken marriage. She had believed that keeping Kishan away would prevent the old wounds from reopening.

But she had not fully understood that the absence itself had become a wound.

Vaasanthi had not been free of the past.

She had simply grown up without being allowed to understand it.

"I thought I was doing what was best for you," Radha whispered.

"I know, Amma."

"I thought if I kept everything settled, you would have a peaceful life."

"I know."

Radha looked at her daughter with anguish.

"But I never asked you what you were missing."

Vaasanthi reached for her mother's hand.

"You were trying to protect me from your pain, Amma. I understand that now. But I was carrying the absence without understanding it. I didn't know whether Dad had forgotten me, whether he had stopped loving me, or whether I had done something wrong."

Kishan closed his eyes.

Each word reached him like a reminder of a life he could never recover.

Vaasanthi continued, her voice gentle.

"I am not telling you this to blame you. I don't want to spend my life blaming either of you. I only want us to stop allowing the past to decide everything that happens next."

Radha held her daughter's hand tightly.

For the first time, she was not thinking only of what Kishan had done to her.

She was thinking of what the years of separation had done to Vaasanthi.

And that changed something inside her.

The room remained quiet for a long time.

Finally, Radha turned towards Kishan.

"There are things I am not ready to forget."

"I understand."

"There are things I may remember differently from you."

"I understand that too."

"And I cannot promise that everything will become normal just because we have spoken today."

Kishan nodded.

"I am not asking you to promise that."

Radha studied him.

"What are you asking for, then?"

Kishan took a moment to answer.

"A chance to do things differently."

She looked away.

He continued, speaking carefully, as though he did not want a single word to become another burden.

"I want to learn how to speak to you without turning every disagreement into a fight. I want to learn how to listen without preparing my reply while you are still talking. I want to be able to say I am sorry without feeling that I have lost something."

He looked towards Vaasanthi.

"And I want to be part of my daughter's life, not as someone who appears only when there is an occasion, but as someone who is genuinely present."

His eyes returned to Radha.

"If you allow me to return to your lives, I will try to put aside the ego that kept telling me to wait for you to make the first move. I will not say that I can become a perfect husband overnight. I cannot promise that I will never make a mistake again."

He paused.

"But I can promise that I will not treat silence as a solution. If we disagree, I will try to speak. If you are hurt, I will try to listen. If I hurt you, I will try to acknowledge it instead of defending myself immediately."

He took a breath.

"And if you tell me that I am making the same mistake again, I will try to hear you before the mistake becomes another fifteen years."

Radha's eyes filled.

Kishan lowered his voice.

"I want to take care of you, Radha. Not because I think you cannot take care of yourself. You have proved that you can. But because I should have been beside you. Because I want to share your burdens, your ordinary days, your worries, and your happiness. I want to be there for Vaasanthi in whatever way she will allow me to be."

He stopped.

Then he said the words he had carried into the room.

"Please give me another chance."

Radha looked at him for a long time.

She could have refused.

She could have told him that fifteen years were too many, that apologies came too late, and that some losses could not be repaired.

And she would not necessarily have been wrong to feel that way.

But she also knew that she had agreed to this meeting because some part of her still wanted to know what would happen if she stopped waiting for the past to change and allowed the present to speak.

She looked at Kishan's face.

Then she looked at Vaasanthi.

Her daughter had spent years becoming independent, practical, and guarded. She had built a career, earned respect, and learned to stand on her own feet. But Radha could now see that beneath all those achievements, a part of Vaasanthi had remained a little girl waiting for something she could never ask for.

A father's affection.

A complete family.

The freedom to love both her parents without feeling that she was betraying one of them.

Radha could not give her daughter the years that had been lost.

But perhaps she could stop adding to that loss.

"Kishan," she said quietly.

He straightened.

"I cannot promise that I will forget everything."

"You don't have to."

"I cannot promise that I will never be angry with you again."

"I know."

"And I cannot promise that we will never disagree."

A faint, sorrowful smile appeared on his face.

"We will probably disagree. We always had different opinions about many things."

For the first time that morning, something resembling an old memory passed between them.

Radha almost smiled, but the tears came first.

She looked at him again.

"But I am willing to try."

Kishan stared at her.

For a moment, he seemed unable to understand what she had said.

"Radha..."

"I am willing to give us another chance," she repeated. "Not because everything that happened was acceptable. Not because I have forgotten the hurt. But because I don't want to spend whatever years remain to us waiting for the other person to speak."

Kishan's eyes filled completely.

He pressed his hands together.

"Thank you."

Radha shook her head gently.

"Don't thank me yet, Kishan. Show me."

He nodded immediately.

"I will."

"Don't make promises today and forget them tomorrow."

"I won't."

"And if something hurts me, don't tell me that I am overreacting before you have listened to what I am saying."

"I won't do that."

She studied him.

"You may make mistakes."

"I will probably make mistakes."

"You may get angry."

"I may."

"But don't disappear into silence again."

Kishan's voice became firm.

"I won't choose silence over us again."

Radha looked down at her hands.

Then she said something that she had not expected to say when she woke up that morning.

"I am sorry too."

Kishan looked at her.

Radha struggled to continue.

"I was hurt. I was angry. I felt that if I allowed you to speak to me, I would lose the strength I had built to carry on with my life. I thought that if I kept the door closed, I could keep the pain outside."

Her voice trembled.

"But I also kept you outside."

She wiped her cheek.

"And I kept Vaasanthi from knowing you."

Kishan shook his head.

"Radha, you don't have to—"

"Please let me finish."

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He fell silent.

"I don't know whether I made the right decisions at every point. At the time, I believed I was doing what I had to do. Perhaps I was protecting myself. Perhaps I was protecting Vaasanthi in the only way I knew. But perhaps I also allowed my hurt to decide too much for too long."

She looked at him.

"I am sorry for the years we lost."

Kishan began to cry.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

The tears simply came, as though something he had held inside himself for years had finally found a way out.

Radha cried too.

They did not embrace immediately.

They did not reach across the distance as if fifteen years had never happened.

Instead, they sat facing each other, crying for the life they had lost and the life that might still be possible.

Sometimes, reconciliation does not begin with an embrace.

Sometimes, it begins when two people stop trying to prove whose pain was greater.

Vaasanthi had imagined this moment so many times that she had almost forgotten how uncertain it would feel when it actually arrived.

She had wanted her parents to reconcile.

But now that they had taken the first steps, she understood that the real work was only beginning.

An apology could open a door.

It could not rebuild a home in a single morning.

Trust would require time.

Old habits would have to be challenged.

Words would need to be followed by actions.

There would be moments when Radha remembered something painful and became distant. There might be moments when Kishan became defensive before catching himself. There would be awkward silences, uncomfortable questions, and conversations that neither of them would know how to finish.

But they had made a decision that had eluded them for fifteen years.

They had decided to try.

Kishan looked towards Vaasanthi.

"Can I ask you something, Ma?"

She nodded.

"Would you be comfortable if I called you sometimes? Not every day, not in a way that disturbs you. I know we cannot suddenly become close just because I am your father."

Vaasanthi felt her throat tighten again.

"You can call me, Daddy."

He closed his eyes briefly.

"And if I don't know what to say?"

She managed a small smile through her tears.

"Then say whatever you know. We can learn the rest."

Kishan laughed softly, though his eyes remained wet.

"That sounds fair."

Radha watched them.

For years, she had imagined Kishan's return as a threat to the life she had built. Now, as she watched their daughter speak to her father, she realized that she was witnessing a relationship that belonged to the two of them as well.

She did not need to decide how close they would become.

She did not need to manage every conversation.

She only needed to allow them the opportunity she had once denied them.

And that realization brought both relief and regret.

She wished she had understood it earlier.

She wished she could have gone back fifteen years and looked at the situation with the understanding she had gained that morning.

But the past did not offer second chances in that form.

It offered only the present.

And the present was asking her what she intended to do with it.

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When Kishan finally stood to leave, the meeting had lasted nearly three hours.

They had spoken about the past, though not every incident had been examined. They had acknowledged their hurt, though not every wound had healed. They had apologized, though neither believed that apologies alone could complete the work ahead.

At the door, Kishan turned towards Radha.

"May I call you tomorrow?"

Radha hesitated for only a moment.

"Yes. Call me."

He nodded.

"And, Radha..."

She looked at him.

"I am sorry."

She let out a small breath.

"You have said that many times today."

"I know."

"Perhaps I have heard you now."

His eyes filled again.

He wanted to say more, but he understood that there was nothing useful to add.

He looked at Vaasanthi.

"Thank you for giving me this chance."

She shook her head.

"I didn't create the relationship, Daddy. I only opened the door. What happens now is up to all of us."

Kishan nodded slowly.

Then he stepped outside.

Vaasanthi watched him walk towards the gate.

For fifteen years, she had imagined her father as a person who existed somewhere beyond the boundaries of her life. Now she had watched him sit in her living room, admit his mistakes, cry, apologize, and ask permission to call his own daughter.

He was no longer only a figure in an old photograph.

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He was a real person, carrying his own regrets, his own weaknesses, and his own love.

She did not know how quickly they would become close.

But she no longer had to spend her life wondering whether she should have tried to know him.

She had tried.

And he had responded.

For the first time, she felt that the future did not have to be dictated by the past.

That evening, Vaasanthi sat beside Radha on the veranda.

The sun was setting slowly. A mild breeze moved through the plants near the steps, and somewhere in the neighbourhood a child was calling out to a friend.

The world had continued its ordinary routine.

But inside their home, something had changed.

Radha held a cup of coffee in both hands.

"Do you think I did the right thing?" she asked.

Vaasanthi turned towards her.

"By agreeing to speak to Daddy?"

Radha nodded.

Vaasanthi considered the question carefully.

"I think you did something brave, Amma."

Radha looked at her.

"Brave? I was frightened throughout the conversation."

"Being brave doesn't mean you weren't frightened."

A faint smile appeared on Radha's face.

"You sound like one of the people you interview."

Vaasanthi laughed.

"Perhaps I have learned something from them."

They sat quietly for a while.

Then Radha asked, "Do you think we can really become a family again?"

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Vaasanthi did not offer an easy assurance.

"I think we can become something new. We cannot return to the exact family we were fifteen years ago. We have all changed. We have lived different lives. We have our own memories and our own wounds."

She paused.

"But perhaps we can build a family that understands those things a little better."

Radha looked towards the street.

"I wish I had spoken sooner."

Vaasanthi felt those words deeply.

She had spent years wondering whether her father would ever return. Now her mother was beginning to wonder about the years she could not recover.

Neither of them could change what had happened.

But perhaps regret could serve a purpose if it taught them how to live differently.

"Amma," Vaasanthi said gently, "I don't want you to spend the rest of your life blaming yourself either."

Radha looked at her.

"You told me something important today. You told me that you thought you were protecting me. I believe you. You made decisions with the understanding and strength you had at that time."

She took her mother's hand.

"But now we understand something more. **Silence can protect us for a while, but sometimes it also keeps us away from the people we want to reach."**

Radha squeezed her hand.

"I don't want to make the same mistake again."

"Then don't, Amma."

Vaasanthi smiled through her tears.

"If something bothers you, speak. If you feel hurt, tell us. If you need time, say that you need time. You don't have to solve everything in one conversation."

Radha nodded slowly.

"And you?"

Vaasanthi was surprised.

"What about me?"

"If something hurts you, will you tell me?"

Vaasanthi looked at her mother.

For years, she had trained herself not to expect too much from anyone. She had become good at keeping her feelings private, handling difficulties alone, and convincing herself that she did not need anyone to understand her.

But she was beginning to realize that independence did not require emotional isolation.

"Yes, Amma," she said. "I will try."

Radha smiled faintly.

"Good. Because I don't want to spend the rest of my life guessing what is happening inside your mind."

Vaasanthi leaned her head against her mother's shoulder.

For a few moments, neither spoke.

It was a small moment. No grand declaration. No promise that the future would be easy.

Just a mother and daughter sitting together, allowing a conversation to bring them a little closer.

Vaasanthi thought of all the people she had interviewed who had described the moment they finally reached out to someone they had lost.

They had not always received the response they wanted.

Some had been rejected. Some had discovered that the other person was not ready.

Some had made peace with the fact that a relationship could not be rebuilt.

But those who had sincerely tried had gained something important.

They no longer had to spend every remaining year wondering whether one small step might have changed everything.

Vaasanthi understood that this was what she had wanted for herself.

Not a guarantee that every relationship would survive. Not a promise that love would erase every mistake.

But the freedom of knowing that she had not allowed fear, pride, or hesitation to make the decision for her.

She had taken the first step. And when the door opened, she had found that there was still a family on the other side.

Later that night, Vaasanthi opened her notebook.

She had written many lessons from her interviews in its pages.

Some were about courage. Some were about patience. Others were about accepting failure, forgiving mistakes, and beginning again.

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Tonight, she turned to a fresh page.

She wrote: ***An apology cannot return the years we have lost. An apology cannot demand forgiveness.***

And taking the first step does not mean carrying the entire responsibility for a relationship.

She paused, then continued.

But when a relationship matters, we owe ourselves the courage to make an honest attempt.

We must be willing to speak, to listen, to explain, and to understand.

If the other person is willing to meet us halfway, we can begin rebuilding.

If they are not, we may still have the peace of knowing that we tried sincerely.

We cannot control another person's decision.

But we can choose not to let our own hesitation become the reason we never tried.

She put down her pen.

Outside, the night was quiet.

For the first time in many years, that quietness did not feel like a wall separating her from someone she loved.

It felt like a pause between conversations.

Tomorrow, Kishan, her dad would call Radha, her mom.

They would speak again.

Perhaps they would struggle to find the right words. Perhaps they would remember old hurts. Perhaps they would discover that rebuilding trust required more patience than either had expected.

But tomorrow, they would have another chance to speak.

And the day after that, another....

Vaasanthi switched off the light and lay down.

She thought of the little girl in the old photograph, sitting on her father's shoulders, smiling at the world without knowing how complicated love could become.

She wished she could go back and tell that little girl that her father had not forgotten her.

She wished she could tell her that one day, after many years, she would hear him call her *Ma*.

But she could not return to that day. She could only live this one.

And perhaps that was enough.

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Because sometimes, **Life does not give us the chance to rewrite the first chapter. It gives us the courage to begin the next one differently**.

For fifteen years, two people had waited for the other to move first.

Now, at last, both had moved.

And somewhere between an apology and an answer, between regret and hope, between the family they had lost and the family they might yet become, a new beginning had quietly taken its first breath.

Chapter 14:

The next morning, Radha woke up before the alarm rang.

For a few moments, she lay still, looking at the ceiling. The previous day's conversation returned to her in fragments.

Kishan sitting across from her.

His voice breaking when he spoke about Vaasanthi. The way he had lowered his head and apologized.

The unexpected admission that his pride had sometimes stopped him from trying again.

And her own words, spoken with a hesitation she had not anticipated.

I am willing to give us another chance.

She had said those words. She had meant them when she said them.

But what did they mean now that the morning had arrived?

Would she be able to speak to him normally? Would she be able to listen to his voice without remembering the arguments that had separated them? Would she be able to distinguish between the man who had hurt her years ago and the man who had sat before her yesterday, asking for another chance?

She did not know.

For fifteen years, she had lived without having to answer those questions. She had created a routine that required no explanations, no difficult conversations, and no decisions about Kishan.

Now the door had opened. And with the opening had come a new responsibility.

Not the responsibility to forget. Not the responsibility to forgive everything immediately.

But the responsibility to discover whether the relationship could become something better than it had been.

Radha sat up and looked towards the other side of the bed.

For years, she had occupied the same space alone. She had become accustomed to the quietness of her mornings, the freedom to make decisions without consulting anyone, and the certainty that she would not have to explain herself to another person.

Independence had protected her. It had also become familiar.

And familiar things, even when they were born out of pain, were not always easy to leave behind.

She got out of bed and walked towards the kitchen.

As she prepared the morning coffee, she heard Vaasanthi moving about in her room.

Her daughter appeared a few minutes later, still sleepy, her hair loosely tied.

"Good morning, Amma."

"Good morning." Radha replied.

Vaasanthi looked at the two cups on the kitchen counter.

"Two coffees today?"

Radha glanced at her.

"One is yours. I have mine."

Vaasanthi smiled and said, "I thought perhaps you were expecting someone."

Radha understood the question beneath the light-hearted remark.

She gave her daughter a look that was intended to be stern, but a small smile escaped her.

"Let your father call first."

Vaasanthi laughed softly.

There it was... A small sentence... An ordinary sentence.

Yet it was the first time in many years that Radha had referred to Kishan without the guardedness that usually accompanied his name.

Vaasanthi did not point it out. She had learned that some changes needed room to grow without being examined too closely.

She took her coffee and sat down.

After a while, Radha asked, "What time do you have to leave for work?"

"Ten. I have an interview scheduled for eleven-thirty."

"Who are you interviewing today?"

"A businesswoman who built a company from a small tailoring unit. The editor thinks her story will be useful for young entrepreneurs."

Radha nodded.

"Then you should prepare properly. You always do better when you are prepared."

Vaasanthi looked at her mother affectionately.

"I know, Amma."

For a few moments, they discussed ordinary things—the interview, the traffic, the vegetables Radha needed to buy, and whether the water supply would be available in the afternoon.

Nothing about their conversation was extraordinary. But Vaasanthi noticed something she had not fully appreciated before.

The house felt lighter.

Not because all its problems had disappeared, but because one of its oldest unspoken subjects had finally been allowed to enter an ordinary conversation.

The name Kishan no longer had to remain outside every morning, every meal, and every memory.

And that, by itself, was a beginning.

At eleven fifteen, Vaasanthi was seated in the television studio, reviewing her questions.

The guest that day was Nandini Sharma, a businesswoman who had started a small tailoring unit with two sewing machines and gradually built a successful garment company.

Vaasanthi had read about her journey the previous evening. She knew the broad outline of the story: financial difficulties, initial rejection from customers, the challenge of managing employees, and the gradual growth of a business that eventually supplied garments to several cities.

But Vaasanthi was no longer satisfied with knowing only the milestones.

She wanted to understand what had happened between them.

What had Nandini felt when her first business loan was rejected?

How had she handled the disappointment of losing a major customer?

What had she done when the people around her advised her to abandon the business?

And what had success cost her in terms of time, relationships, and personal sacrifices?

These were the questions that interested Vaasanthi now.

Earlier, she might have concentrated on figures, achievements, and the familiar story of a person who had overcome obstacles.

Now she wanted to understand the person behind the achievements.

Ravi entered the studio carrying his camera equipment and asked, "You look serious today," he said.

"I am preparing."

"You always prepare."

"Then why are you surprised?"

"I'm not surprised. I'm observing."

Vaasanthi laughed.

"Please observe the camera angle. I will observe the guest."

Ravi grinned.

"That is why we make a good team."

As the studio staff completed the final arrangements, Vaasanthi's phone vibrated.

It was a message from Kishan.

Good morning, Ma. I hope you are doing well. I wanted to call, but I wasn't sure what time would be convenient. Let me know when you have a little time.

Vaasanthi read it twice.

There was nothing extraordinary about the message. It contained no emotional declaration, no long explanation, and no demand for an immediate reply.

Yet it made her smile.

Her father was trying to learn how to enter her life without assuming that he could simply walk into it.

He was asking. He was allowing her to decide.

She typed a reply.

Good morning, Dad, I am at work now. I will call you in the evening. You can call me whenever you want, but if I am busy, I will call you back.

She hesitated before pressing send. Then she did.

A minute later, his reply arrived.

Thank you, Ma. All the best for your interview.

Vaasanthi placed the phone beside her notes.

For years, she had imagined that reconnecting with her father would require a dramatic conversation in which every lost moment would somehow be compensated for by a flood of words.

Instead, the relationship was beginning with a simple message.

A greeting....A question.....A wish for her success.

She wondered how many relationships could have been saved if people had understood the value of such small gestures before silence became their habit.

Then the studio director raised his hand.

"Ready, Vaasanthi?"

She looked towards the camera.

"Ready."

The red light came on.

And she began....The interview went well.

Nandini spoke openly about the difficulties she had faced while establishing her business. She described the disappointment of seeing her first batch of garments rejected by a customer, the long hours she had worked, and the embarrassment she had felt when she had to borrow money from relatives.

At one point, Vaasanthi asked, "Was there ever a time when you wanted to give up?"

Nandini smiled faintly.

"Many times. People imagine that entrepreneurs are always confident. We are not. Sometimes we are simply too afraid of losing everything we have already invested to stop."

"Then what helped you continue?"

Nandini considered the question.

"Two things. First, I learned to separate a failed decision from my identity. If a business decision failed, it did not mean I was a failure as a person. Second, I learned to ask for help."

She paused.

"I used to think asking for help was a sign of weakness. I wanted to solve every problem myself. But a business cannot grow if the person running it believes that every burden must be carried alone."

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

Nandini continued.

"The same is true of relationships. You can be independent and still need people. You can be strong and still admit that someone has hurt you. **Strength is not the ability to live without anyone. Sometimes strength is the ability to tell someone what you need without turning it into a fight."**

For a moment, Vaasanthi felt the words settle somewhere deep inside her.

She had heard similar lessons in different forms from the people she interviewed. But now, because of what had happened at home, those words carried a different weight.

The interview ended with a discussion about the importance of patience, learning from mistakes, and accepting support.

After the cameras were switched off, Nandini shook Vaasanthi's hand.

"You ask very thoughtful questions," she said. "You don't seem interested only in what a person has achieved. You want to know what the journey has done to them."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"Perhaps the journey tells us more than the destination."

"That is true," Nandini replied. "And sometimes the people who help us reach the destination are more important than the destination itself."

The words stayed with Vaasanthi long after Nandini left.

As she walked towards the editing room, she thought about the different journeys she had encountered over the past two years.

A singer who had called her father after three years of silence.

A composer who had repaired a friendship after twelve years.

A teacher who had apologized to her younger brother at a family wedding.

A sportswoman who had learned to see her father's fear beneath his objections.

And now, a businesswoman who had discovered that asking for help was not the opposite of independence.

Each person had taught her something different. Together, they had changed the way she understood human beings.

Perhaps this was what made her work meaningful. She was not merely collecting stories. She was learning how to live.

That evening, Vaasanthi reached home later than expected.

She had spent additional time with the editing team, reviewing the interview and suggesting a few changes to the sequence of questions and answers.

As she entered, she heard Radha speaking on the phone.

Her mother's voice was quiet.

"Yes, Kishan. I understand."

Vaasanthi stopped near the doorway.

Radha was standing beside the dining table, holding the phone close to her ear.

"No, I am not saying we should discuss everything today."

A pause.

"I only want us to speak properly. If we begin discussing every old argument at once, we will end up fighting again."

Another pause.

"Yes. We can speak tomorrow."

She listened for a few seconds. Then she said, "All right. Take care."

Radha ended the call.

When she turned, she found Vaasanthi standing nearby. For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Vaasanthi asked gently, "Was that Daddy?"

Radha nodded.

"Yes."

"How was the conversation?"

Radha considered the question and said, "It was all right."

Vaasanthi waited.

Her mother sighed.

"He asked whether I had eaten. He asked whether I had been to the market. He asked whether the water supply problem had been resolved."

A small, almost disbelieving smile appeared on her face.

"After fifteen years, he is asking me about the water supply."

Vaasanthi laughed.

Radha laughed too.

It was a brief laugh, but there was something deeply moving about hearing it.

For years, Kishan had been a name that could make the atmosphere in their home uncomfortable.

Now Radha was describing an ordinary telephone conversation with him and finding humour in it.

"He said he wanted to discuss what happened between us," Radha continued. "I told him we could speak tomorrow. I don't want to discuss everything in one day."

"That sounds sensible, Amma."

Radha looked at her daughter and asked, "Do you think he has really changed?"

Vaasanthi did not answer immediately.

She had learned enough from her interviews to know that one conversation could reveal intention, but only time could reveal consistency.

"I think he wants to change," she said. "And I think he is trying. But we'll have to see how he behaves when things become difficult again."

Radha nodded slowly.

"That is what I was thinking too."

She placed the phone on the table.

"I don't want to be foolish. I don't want to believe everything will be different just because he apologized."

"You don't have to believe everything today, Amma."

Vaasanthi sat beside her.

"You can give him a chance and still take your time. You can forgive him for some things and still need time for others. You can be willing to rebuild the relationship without pretending that nothing happened."

Radha looked at her thoughtfully and asked, "How did you become so sensible?"

Vaasanthi smiled.

"I interview sensible people." Vasanthi said.

Her mother laughed again.

But after a moment, Vaasanthi added, "And I think I have spent a lot of time trying to understand what happens when people don't speak to each other."

Radha's expression softened.

"I suppose you have."

They sat together until the evening light faded.

For once, the conversation did not end because either of them had run out of things to say.

It ended simply because it was time to prepare dinner.

The following afternoon, Kishan called Radha again.

This time, she answered without waiting for the phone to ring a second time.

"Hello."

"Hello, Radha."

There was a pause.

Then Kishan asked, "Are you free to speak?"

"Yes."

"How was your morning?"

"Normal."

"Did you go to the market?"

"Yes."

He smiled faintly on the other side of the call.

For years, he had imagined what he would say if he ever got the chance to speak to her again. He had prepared explanations, apologies, and questions.

Now he was discovering that a relationship was not rebuilt only through conversations about the past.

It was also rebuilt through conversations about the present.

He asked about a neighbour they both knew. Radha mentioned that the neighbour's daughter had recently married. They spoke about a road repair that had caused traffic congestion near the market.

For a few minutes, they sounded like two people discussing ordinary events.

Then the conversation slowed.

Kishan took a breath.

"Radha, can I say something?"

"Tell me."

"I am glad you answered my call."

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Radha remained quiet.

"I know that may sound like a very small thing," he continued. "But I have imagined speaking to you so many times that I don't know how to explain what it feels like to actually do it."

Radha looked out of the window.

"I also don't know how to explain what it feels like to speak to you again."

"I understand."

She almost said that he could not understand everything she had felt. But she stopped herself.

There would be time to explain those things. There would be time to disagree.

For now, she could acknowledge the truth of what he had said.

"I am trying, Kishan," she replied.

"I know. I am trying too."

Another pause followed.

Then Radha said, "I don't want us to keep apologizing every time we speak."

Kishan was silent for a moment.

"What would you like us to do instead?"

"Talk. Listen. If something bothers us, say it. If we disagree, let us disagree without allowing it to become the end of everything."

Kishan closed his eyes. Those were simple words.

But they described precisely the kind of relationship he had failed to protect.

"All right," he said. "We will try."

"And don't assume that because I have agreed to speak, I will always agree with you."

A quiet laugh escaped him.

"Radha, if you had always agreed with me, I would have suspected something was wrong."

She laughed too....It surprised them both.

For a moment, the years between them seemed less like a wall and more like a long road they had finally begun to walk.

But the laughter did not erase the past. It simply gave them a different way to approach the future.

Before ending the call, Kishan said, "Can I call tomorrow?"

Radha answered without hesitation.

"Yes. You can Call me."

After disconnecting, she remained by the window for a while.

She had not realized how much she had missed the ordinary parts of their relationship until she had begun to experience them again.

Not the grand occasions. Not the promises.

Just the simple knowledge that someone might call to ask how her day had gone.

She had lived without that knowledge for fifteen years.

She had survived. But **surviving and sharing a life were not the same thing.**

For the first time, she was willing to find out whether there was still room for the second.

Over the following weeks, the calls became part of their lives.

At first, they were brief.

Kishan would ask how Radha was feeling. Radha would ask whether he had visited a doctor for the persistent knee pain he had once mentioned. They would discuss the weather, the rising cost of groceries, and the small changes taking place in the neighbourhood.

Sometimes they spoke for only five minutes. Sometimes the conversation lasted half an hour.

And sometimes they struggled.

One afternoon, Kishan mentioned an old disagreement about a financial decision they had made years ago.

He began explaining why he had acted as he had.

Radha immediately felt the old irritation rise inside her.

"You always had an explanation, Kishan."

The sentence came out more sharply than she intended. There was silence on the line.

For a moment, Kishan felt the familiar impulse to defend himself.

He wanted to remind her of the circumstances, the pressures he had faced, and the reasons he believed his decision had made sense at the time.

The old argument stood ready to return. Then he remembered the promise he had made.

Listen before you reply.

He took a breath.

"You are right about one thing," he said slowly. "I am explaining myself again before asking how you felt."

Radha did not answer.

He continued.

"I still want to explain what happened from my side, but I don't want my explanation to make you feel that your experience doesn't matter. Tell me what you remember."

Radha was silent for several seconds. Then she began to speak.

She described the worry she had felt, the uncertainty of not knowing what would happen next, and the loneliness of believing that she had been left to manage the consequences by herself.

Kishan listened.

He did not agree with every detail of her recollection. There were parts he remembered differently. But for once, he allowed her to finish before offering his own account.

When she had finished, he said, "I remember some of it differently. But I understand now that you felt alone in dealing with it."

Radha closed her eyes.

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The sentence did not settle every question. Yet it was different from what she had grown accustomed to hearing.

He had not said she was wrong. He had not insisted that she should have understood him.

He had acknowledged her experience.

"Thank you for listening," she said quietly.

Kishan looked down at the phone in his hand.

"Thank you for telling me."

It was not a perfect conversation. But it was a conversation that did not end in silence.

And that made it important.

Vaasanthi began noticing the changes in her mother.

Radha no longer became tense whenever Kishan's name appeared on the phone screen. She sometimes mentioned something he had said, occasionally laughed at a familiar memory, and once even asked Vaasanthi whether she thought her father would like a particular sweet.

That last question made Vaasanthi smile for the rest of the day.

"Why are you smiling?" Radha asked.

"Nothing, Amma."

"Tell me."

Vaasanthi sat beside her.

"You asked whether Daddy would like the sweet."

Radha looked embarrassed.

"So?"

"So, it has been a long time since you wondered what he might like."

Radha was quiet for some time.. Then she said, "Perhaps I am remembering the things I used to know."

Vaasanthi took her mother's hand and said, "Perhaps you are."

The two of them sat together, looking at the small box of sweets on the table.

It seemed almost absurd that such a simple question could carry so much meaning.

But relationships were often made up of details that outsiders might never notice.

The way someone remembered how you liked your coffee.

The way a person asked whether you had reached home safely.

The way a familiar name slowly became easier to say.

And the way a small act of consideration could tell someone that they had not been forgotten.

Vaasanthi thought of all the people she had interviewed who had lost relationships because they had believed that only grand gestures could repair them.

Sometimes, a grand gesture was necessary. But sometimes, a relationship needed something far less dramatic.

A phone call... A patient answer.....A willingness to listen...And the decision to try again tomorrow.

One Sunday, Kishan visited their home for lunch.

It was the first time he had entered the house since their conversation.

Radha had spent the morning preparing food, though she insisted that she had not done anything special.

Vaasanthi knew better.

Her mother had prepared several of Kishan's favourite dishes.

She had also taken out the old serving bowls they used to keep for special occasions.

When Kishan arrived, he brought a small bag of fruit.

"I didn't know what to bring," he said.

"You didn't have to bring anything," Radha replied.

"I know. But I thought I should bring something."

Radha took the bag from him and said, "Then next time, bring yourself. That will be enough."

Kishan looked at her... For a second, neither spoke.

Then he smiled and said, "All right."

Vaasanthi watched them from the doorway.

The exchange was ordinary, almost insignificant. Yet she could see that both were trying.

Radha was allowing herself to make room for him in the home again.

Kishan was trying to participate without assuming that he already belonged in every corner of her life.

They ate lunch together.

At first, the conversation was cautious. They spoke about Vaasanthi's work, the neighbourhood, and a relative who had recently moved to another city.

Then Kishan asked Radha about a plant near the veranda. "Is that the same jasmine plant you had years ago?"

Radha looked towards it and said, "No. That one dried up. I planted this one later."

"It looks healthy."

"I take care of it."

"I can see that."

She smiled faintly.

"I have had enough practice."

Kishan laughed.

Vaasanthi joined in.

For a few moments, the dining room filled with the sound of three people laughing together.

Vaasanthi felt something inside her loosen.

She had spent years believing that family happiness was a condition that either existed or did not exist.

Now she was discovering that it could also be something people created through small, repeated acts of care.

After lunch, Kishan helped clear the table. Radha protested.

"You don't have to do that."

"I know."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"Because I can."

She looked at him, surprised by the simplicity of his answer.

He carried the plates into the kitchen. Radha followed him.

For a moment, Vaasanthi watched them standing side by side near the sink, discussing where a particular bowl should be placed.

She did not intrude. She went to her room and closed the door gently.

Once inside, she sat at her desk and opened her notebook.

She had once believed that her parents' separation had taught her the safest way to live: expect less, depend less, and never allow emotions to become powerful enough to hurt her.

Now she was learning something different.

A relationship could be vulnerable without being weak.

A person could be independent without refusing affection.

And love, when accompanied by responsibility, could become something steadier than a collection of promises.

She wrote:

Rebuilding a relationship does not mean returning to the life that existed before the damage.

It means creating a new life in which the damage is understood, the mistakes are acknowledged, and the same wounds are not deliberately reopened.

Forgiveness may begin with a conversation.

Trust grows when the next conversation is handled better.

And love becomes believable when the small promises are kept.

She paused and looked towards the living room.

Her parents were still talking.

Their voices rose occasionally, then softened. Once, she heard Radha laugh.

Vaasanthi smiled.

The future remained uncertain. But uncertainty no longer frightened her in the same way.

For the first time, she was not waiting for her family to become what it had once been.

She was watching them learn how to become something new.

That evening, after Kishan had left, Radha sat beside Vaasanthi on the veranda.

"He has changed in some ways," she said.

Vaasanthi nodded.

"He is trying."

"I know."

Radha looked at the gate through which Kishan had walked out.

"I still remember the things that hurt me."

"You are allowed to remember them, Amma."

"Sometimes I wonder whether I am being unfair by giving him another chance."

Vaasanthi considered her mother's words.

"I don't think giving someone a chance means declaring that everything they did was acceptable. It means deciding that you are willing to see whether things can be different now."

Radha nodded slowly.

"And if they are not?"

"Then you will have to decide what is right for you. But you don't have to make that decision before you have given the relationship a genuine opportunity."

Radha looked at her daughter.

"You have thought about this a great deal."

"Yes."

"Because of us?"

Vaasanthi took a breath.

"Partly. But also because of all the people I have met through my work. Every person has a story, Amma. Sometimes we see only the part that hurt us. Sometimes the other person sees only the part that hurt them. And both people can spend years defending their own pain without understanding what the other person experienced."

She paused.

"I don't want to live that way. I don't want to reach the end of my life and wonder whether I could have saved a friendship, a relationship, or a bond by making one honest attempt."

Radha listened carefully.

"But I also don't want to spend my life begging someone to care," Vaasanthi added. "If I take a step, the other person must decide whether to take one too. I can offer a conversation. I cannot have it alone."

Radha's expression softened.

"That is true."

Vaasanthi leaned back in her chair.

"I want to know that I tried what I reasonably could. If the other person still chooses to walk away, that is their decision. I may grieve it, but I don't want to carry the lifelong question of whether my own silence made the decision for both of us."

Radha looked at her daughter for a long time.Then she reached out and gently touched her cheek.

"You have learned a great deal, Vaasanthi."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"So have you, Amma."

Radha laughed softly.

"Perhaps we both needed to."

They sat together until the sky turned dark. Neither tried to fill every quiet moment with words.

They had begun to understand that silence itself was not always the enemy.

There was a difference between the silence of two people who refused to speak and the quietness of two people who felt comfortable sitting together.

One created distance....The other allowed closeness.

Vaasanthi had spent years living with the first kind.

Now, at last, she was learning to recognize the second.

And somewhere beyond the gate, Kishan was carrying the memory of an ordinary Sunday lunch.

He had not regained fifteen years. He had not been promised that everything would be forgiven.

But he had eaten a meal in his family's home. He had spoken to Radha without the conversation ending in anger.

He had heard his daughter laugh. And he had been invited to return.

For a man who had waited fifteen years for another chance, those small things were not small at all.

They were the beginning of a life he had almost stopped hoping to share.

The first step had opened the door.

Now, every ordinary day would decide how far they could walk through it.

Chapter 15:

There are moments in life when we expect happiness to arrive with great announcements.

We imagine that a reunion will bring tears of joy, that forgiveness will erase years of pain, and that a family coming together again will suddenly feel complete.

But life does not always work that way. Sometimes, happiness arrives quietly.

It comes in the form of a phone call asking whether someone has eaten. It hides in a familiar dish prepared after many years. It appears when a person who once stood outside a home is invited to sit inside it. And sometimes, it reveals itself through the simplest question that nobody thought to ask for years.

How are you?

For Vaasanthi, the days following her parents' reunion were filled with such small discoveries.

She had imagined her father's return to their lives many times. In some of those imagined moments, she had pictured herself running towards him, holding him tightly, and crying until every unanswered question disappeared. In others, she had imagined confronting him, asking why he had allowed fifteen years to pass without finding a way back to her.

But when the reunion actually happened, she discovered that real life was far more complicated than the scenes she had created in her imagination.

Her father was not a stranger anymore, but neither was he yet the familiar presence she had missed throughout her childhood.

Her mother had agreed to give their relationship another chance, but the years of hurt had not vanished overnight.

And Vaasanthi, who had spent so long convincing herself that she needed nobody, was suddenly learning how to make room for someone she had secretly needed all her life.

It was a strange feeling.

She was happy, but sometimes she felt guilty about being happy in front of her mother.

She was relieved, but occasionally wondered whether the peace in their home was too fragile to trust.

She wanted to recover the lost years, yet knew that no amount of affection could return her to the childhood she had missed.

The past had not changed.

But the future, for the first time in many years, seemed willing to offer them a different possibility.

On a Wednesday evening, Vaasanthi returned home later than usual.

An interview with a senior environmental scientist had gone beyond its scheduled time. The scientist had spoken about the disappearance of lakes, the shrinking of green spaces, and the indifference with which people often treated the world they would one day leave to their children.

Vaasanthi had stayed back to ask a few additional questions. She had always believed that a good reporter needed to prepare well, but over the past two years she had discovered that preparation was only half the work.

The other half was listening.

People often revealed their most important truths after they had finished answering the questions they had expected.

By the time she reached home, it was almost nine.

She opened the door quietly, expecting to find her mother waiting in the living room.

Instead, she heard laughter coming from the kitchen.

She stopped.

It was her father's laughter.

For a moment, she simply stood near the entrance, holding her handbag and looking towards the kitchen as though she had stumbled into a scene from somebody else's life.

Then she heard her mother say, "You are still making the same mistake!"

"What mistake?" Kishan asked.

"You are adding too much water."

"That is impossible. I have been making tea for myself for years."

"That is precisely the problem. You have been making tea for yourself. Now you are making it for three people."

Kishan laughed again.

"Fine. From tomorrow, I will attend your tea-making classes."

"First, learn to make one decent cup."

Vaasanthi smiled.

It was such an ordinary exchange that, under different circumstances, she might not have paid any attention to it.

But she had never heard these two people speak to each other like this.

For years, the only conversations about her father had been brief, guarded, and often uncomfortable. His name had been surrounded by an invisible boundary in their home. Even when Vaasanthi wanted to ask questions, she had learned to stop herself.

Now, she was hearing her mother complain about the amount of water in his tea.

It was almost funny.

And yet, something about it touched a place inside her that had remained empty for a very long time.

She entered the kitchen.

Her father was standing beside the stove, holding a teaspoon. Her mother was at the counter, cutting vegetables for the next day's lunch.

Both looked up.

"Ah, the busy journalist has arrived," Kishan said.

Vaasanthi raised an eyebrow.

"Who told you I was busy?"

"Your mother. She has been telling me about your work."

Radha glanced at him.

"I only told him that your interview went late."

"And I am sure you mentioned that I have to eat dinner alone whenever she works late," Vaasanthi said, looking at her mother.

Radha gave her a mock stern look.

"Someone has to tell him how difficult it is to have a journalist in the family."

"Then I should warn you both," Vaasanthi replied. "I may become even more difficult in the coming years."

"That is what I am worried about," Kishan said.

They laughed.

Vaasanthi laughed too.

But as she went to wash her hands, she felt a sudden tightness in her throat.

She had imagined her father returning to her life as a grand emotional event. She had not imagined that he would be standing in their kitchen, making bad tea and being teased by her mother.

Perhaps that was what she had missed most.

Not the grand gestures. The ordinary moments.

The everyday presence of a father who could be teased, questioned, depended upon, and sometimes disagreed with.

The kind of father whose presence was so natural that a daughter would never think of it as a blessing until she had lived without it.

Dinner that night was a simple affair.

Kishan asked Vaasanthi about her interview. She explained the scientist's concerns about disappearing lakes and the need for local communities to protect natural resources.

He listened with interest.

"Do you enjoy these interviews?" he asked.

"Very much."

"Even when you have to work late?"

"Especially when I learn something new."

"What is the most interesting thing you have learned so far?"

Vaasanthi thought for a moment and said, "That people are rarely as simple as they appear from the outside."

Her father nodded.

"That is true."

She looked at him.

"Sometimes, a person who appears stubborn is actually frightened. Sometimes, a person who appears indifferent is hurt. Sometimes, two people believe they are protecting themselves, but they end up hurting each other."

She paused.

"And sometimes, they wait so long for the other person to speak that they forget what they were waiting for in the first place."

The room became quiet.

Kishan lowered his eyes towards his plate.

Radha stopped serving the curry.

Vaasanthi immediately wondered whether she had said too much.

She had not intended to bring their past into the conversation. Yet the lessons she had learned through her interviews had become so deeply connected with her own life that she could no longer speak about relationships without remembering them.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to make dinner uncomfortable."

Kishan shook his head.

"Don't apologise for saying something true."

He looked at Radha, then at his daughter.

"I spent too many years thinking about what I had lost. Perhaps I should have spent more time thinking about what I could still do."

Radha remained silent for a moment. Then she placed another serving of curry on his plate.

"Eat before it gets cold," she said. It was not an answer to his words.

It was not forgiveness expressed in a sentence.

But Vaasanthi noticed something.

Her mother had served him without being asked.

Her father accepted the food without making a comment about the past.

And the conversation moved on.

Sometimes, she was beginning to understand, a relationship did not heal through one perfect conversation. It healed through a hundred imperfect ones in which people gradually learned not to repeat the same mistakes.

The following Sunday, Kishan arrived with a small paper bag.

Vaasanthi opened the door.

"What is that, Daddy?"

He smiled at the word.

She had called him *Daddy* without thinking.

Neither of them mentioned it.

"Something for you," he said.

She took the bag and opened it.

Inside was a book about journalism and the history of Indian newspapers. The cover showed an old printing press, and the pages carried stories of reporters who had travelled through difficult circumstances to bring important events to the public.

Vaasanthi ran her fingers over the cover.

"You bought this for me?"

"I saw it in a bookshop. I thought you might like it."

She turned the book over and looked at the back cover.

"How did you know I would be interested in this?"

He smiled.

"I don't know everything about you yet."

The sentence was simple. But it held something she had not expected to hear from him.

I don't know everything about you yet.

There was no attempt to pretend that he had been present throughout her life. No claim that he understood her perfectly. No assumption that the years apart could be ignored.

He was acknowledging the distance between them.

And by doing so, he was giving them a chance to cross it honestly.

Vaasanthi looked at him and said, "Then you will have to learn."

"I would like that."

She held the book against her chest for a moment.

"Thank you, Daddy."

His smile changed.

It became smaller, more vulnerable.

Bookwave e-magazine

"You're welcome, ma."

For a few seconds, neither spoke.

Then Radha called from inside, asking whether they intended to stand at the entrance all morning.

Vaasanthi laughed and invited him in.

She placed the book on her table, but before leaving the room, she returned to it and opened the first page.

On the inside cover, Kishan had written a message in his careful handwriting.

For Vaasanthi. May you always have the courage to ask the right questions, and the patience to listen to the answers.

She read it twice.

Then she closed the book gently. Her father had missed years of her life.

He could not compensate for every school function he had not attended, every examination result he had not celebrated, or every difficult evening when she had wanted to ask him something and had nobody to ask.

But he could begin now. And she could allow him to.

That afternoon, she spent nearly an hour telling him about her work. She described her first live report, her nervousness before interviewing Dr. Revathi, and the unexpected wisdom she had discovered while speaking to people from different walks of life.

He listened to everything.

Sometimes he asked questions. Sometimes he smiled. Once or twice, he interrupted her because he was too eager to understand something, and she corrected him.

It felt unfamiliar. It also felt wonderful.

For the first time in years, she was not merely remembering a father. She was getting to know one.

At work, the changes in Vaasanthi were becoming noticeable.

She had always been disciplined, but now her colleagues observed that she seemed more patient when dealing with people. She was less interested in winning an argument and more interested in understanding why the argument had begun.

During one editorial meeting, a young reporter disagreed strongly with the decision to drop a local story.

The discussion grew tense.

The reporter argued that the story deserved attention. The senior editor insisted that there was insufficient verification and that publishing it could unfairly damage someone's reputation.

Vaasanthi listened to both sides.

Earlier in her career, she might have supported the person whose argument appeared more logical. She believed that facts and rules were enough to settle most disagreements.

Now she asked the young reporter, "What is the most important thing you want the audience to understand from this story?"

"The truth," he replied immediately.

"And what do you think we still need to establish before we can tell it responsibly?"

He hesitated.

The editor looked at Vaasanthi.

She continued gently, "Wanting to tell the truth is important. But we must also make sure we haven't mistaken our first understanding of a situation for the whole truth."

The young reporter looked down at his notes.

After a moment, he nodded.

"All right. I'll verify the remaining details."

The meeting moved forward without further argument. Later, Ravi caught up with Vaasanthi near the studio.

"Something has changed about you," he said.

She glanced at him.

"What now?"

"Earlier, you would have given him a lecture about facts and deadlines."

"Perhaps he needed one."

"Perhaps. But today you asked him a question that made him think for himself."

"Is that a complaint?"

"No. It is an observation."

She smiled.

Ravi leaned against the wall.

"You seem to have become more interested in what happens inside people's minds than in what they say outside."

Vaasanthi thought about it.

"Maybe because I have discovered that the two are not always the same."

"That is a dangerous discovery for a journalist."

"Why?"

"Because once you start understanding people, it becomes harder to judge them quickly."

She looked at him.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"It is a good thing. But it also means you have to work harder."

They laughed.

Then Ravi's expression became thoughtful.

"Whatever you are learning, keep learning it. The best reporters don't just collect information, Vaasanthi. They understand the people behind it."

She carried those words with her through the rest of the day.

That evening, a message arrived on Vaasanthi's phone from an unfamiliar number.

Hello, Vaasanthi. This is Meera Krishnan. I hope you are doing well.

She read it with surprise.

Meera, the athlete she had interviewed months earlier, had occasionally appeared in the news, but Vaasanthi had not expected her to contact her personally.

A second message followed.

I was remembering our conversation today. I don't know why, but I felt like telling you something.

Vaasanthi replied immediately.

Of course, Meera. Please tell me.

The response came a few minutes later.

After our interview, I called my father. We had been postponing a conversation about something that had hurt both of us. I remembered what we discussed that day, and I decided not to postpone it again. We spoke for nearly two hours. We did not agree on everything, but we understood each other better.

Vaasanthi stared at the screen.

Then another message appeared.

I wanted you to know that your questions helped me look at something differently. Thank you.

Vaasanthi felt a quiet warmth spread through her.

She had entered journalism because she wanted to tell stories, to report what was happening around her, and to build a career through her own effort.

She had never imagined that a conversation she conducted in a studio might influence someone to have a difficult conversation at home.

She typed a reply, deleted it, and typed again.

Thank you for telling me, Meera. I am happy that you spoke to him. I am learning that sometimes we don't know what a single conversation may change. We only have to be willing to begin it.

She sent the message.

Then she sat quietly for a while.

Until recently, the idea of taking the first step had been a lesson she was trying to apply to her own family. Now she was beginning to understand that it could travel much further than that.

A question could help someone reconsider an old belief.

A conversation could give two people the courage to speak after years of hesitation.

A story could reach a person at precisely the moment when they needed to hear it.

And a journalist, if she listened carefully enough, might do more than report what had happened.

She might help someone see what was still possible. That thought did not make Vaasanthi feel powerful.

It made her feel responsible.

A week later, she visited her parents' room to return a book she had borrowed from her mother.

She found Radha sitting near the window, folding freshly washed clothes.

Kishan was in the living room, speaking to someone on the phone.

Vaasanthi sat beside her mother.

"Amma, can I ask you something?"

Radha looked up.

"You don't have to ask permission to ask a question."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"I know. But this one may be difficult."

Her mother's hands slowed.

"What is it?"

"Are you happy that Daddy is back?"

Radha did not answer immediately.

She folded a shirt, placed it on the pile, and looked towards the window.

"I am trying to be."

Vaasanthi waited.

"I am not going to pretend that everything is the same as it was fifteen years ago," Radha continued. "There are things I remember that still hurt. Sometimes, when he says something casually, I remember something that happened long ago. I wonder whether I can trust that things will be different this time."

"That is understandable."

"And sometimes I become angry with myself."

"Why, Amma?"

Radha's eyes remained on the clothes in front of her.

"Because I wonder whether I should have spoken to him earlier. Whether I should have allowed him to explain himself. Whether I let my hurt decide too much."

Vaasanthi felt a familiar ache.

She had spent years wondering why her mother had never taken that step.

Now, hearing Radha question herself, she realised that the answer might never be as simple as she had wanted it to be.

Radha had been hurt. She had made decisions from that hurt. Those decisions had affected her daughter as well as her husband.

Understanding the reasons did not erase the consequences.

But perhaps it made a different future possible.

"Amma," Vaasanthi said softly, "I don't want you to spend the rest of your life blaming yourself."

Radha turned to her.

"Nor do I want you to forget what happened."

"I won't."

"Then what do you want?"

Vaasanthi thought carefully before answering.

"I want us to learn from it. I want you and Daddy to have a chance to build something better now. And I want to remember this whenever I have an important relationship in my own life."

Radha studied her face.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I don't want to spend years waiting for someone to make the first move if I can make it myself. I don't want to lose a friendship, a relationship, or a bond simply because I am afraid of looking weak. If I have hurt someone, I want to try to make it right. If someone has hurt me, I want to understand whether the relationship can be repaired. I want to know that I made an honest effort."

She paused.

"But I also know that I cannot do everything alone. The other person must be willing too."

Radha listened without interrupting.

At last, she reached out and held her daughter's hand.

"You have learned something that took me many years to understand."

Vaasanthi looked down at their joined hands.

"Perhaps I learned it because I had to live with the consequences of not knowing it."

Radha's eyes filled.

For a moment, Vaasanthi worried that she had hurt her mother again.

But Radha drew her closer and said, "I am sorry, ma," she whispered. "I am sorry for the things you missed."

Vaasanthi rested her head against her mother's shoulder.

For years, she had wanted her mother to acknowledge the absence of her father. She had wanted someone to admit that the separation had affected her too, that a child's longing did not disappear simply because adults had reasons for their decisions.

Now, at last, the acknowledgment had come. It did not return her childhood.

But it gave her childhood a voice. And sometimes, being heard was the beginning of healing.

That night, Vaasanthi opened her notebook.

She had started writing down the lessons she learned from her interviews. In the beginning, they had been brief observations about courage, failure, discipline, and success.

Over time, the notebook had become something more personal.

It had become a record of the person she was slowly becoming.

She turned to a fresh page and wrote:

We often think relationships are preserved by the big things we do for one another. But perhaps they survive because of the small things we do consistently.

The call we make even when we are embarrassed.

The apology we offer before pride grows stronger.

The question we ask instead of making an assumption.

The explanation we listen to, even when we are hurt.

The time we give someone to change, while also protecting our own dignity.

The ordinary kindness that tells another person, without making a speech, that they still matter.

She paused and looked at the lines.

Then she added:

I cannot recover the fifteen years my father and I lost. But I can decide what I do with the years that remain.

I cannot make my parents forget every hurt. But I can support them as they learn to speak again.

And I cannot guarantee that every relationship I try to save will survive. But I can make sure that fear, pride, or hesitation does not prevent me from making an honest attempt.

She placed the pen down.

For the first time, the thought of her lost childhood did not feel like a door that had been permanently closed.

It felt like a room she could finally enter without being afraid of what she might find there.

There would always be sadness in that room.

There would always be memories of school functions, birthdays, achievements, and difficult days when she had wished her father were there.

But there would also be a new memory.

The memory of a Sunday afternoon when her dad brought her a book.

The memory of a badly prepared cup of tea.

The memory of her parents laughing in the kitchen.

And the memory of hearing her father call her *ma* as naturally as though he had never stopped being her father.

She could not change the beginning of her story.

But she was no longer allowing that beginning to dictate every page that followed.

The next morning, Vaasanthi reached the office early.

The newsroom was still relatively quiet. A few desks were occupied, the monitors were beginning to glow, and the sound of the first day's assignments travelled through the room.

Her editor, Mr. Menon, was standing near the conference table with a file in his hand.

"Vaasanthi, do you have a few minutes?"

"Certainly, sir."

He gestured towards the chair opposite him.

"I have been reviewing your recent interviews."

She sat down, trying not to appear curious.

"Is there any problem?"

"No problem. Quite the opposite."

He opened the file.

"Your interviews are doing well. The audience response has been encouraging, and the feedback from several of your guests has been excellent. But there is something else I have noticed."

He looked at her.

"You are not rushing people anymore."

Vaasanthi smiled faintly.

"Is that good or bad, sir?"

"It depends on the situation. A reporter must respect time and remain focused. But when you interview someone about their life, sometimes the most important answer comes after the person has paused."

He closed the file.

"You have begun to understand that. It is a valuable quality."

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

"We are considering a new series," he continued. "Longer conversations with people whose journeys have something meaningful to offer our audience. Not just celebrities. People who have faced difficult choices, rebuilt their lives, overcome setbacks, or changed the lives of others."

He paused.

"I want you to be part of the team developing it."

For a moment, Vaasanthi did not speak.

This was more than another interview assignment. It was an opportunity to help shape the kind of journalism she believed in.

"I would be honoured, sir."

"Good. I want you to think about the format, the kind of people we should approach, and the questions we should be asking. We will discuss it in detail next week."

She left his office with the file's outline in her hand and a feeling she could not quite name.

A few years earlier, she had fought simply to be given a chance.

Now she was being invited to help decide what that chance could become.

She had worked for this. She had prepared, struggled, learned, and improved. Her growth was not a gift from anyone. It was the result of her own effort.

But she also knew that the people she had interviewed had taught her things no textbook could have taught.

They had shown her that success was not merely about reaching a position.

It was about what one became along the way.

As she returned to her desk, she glanced at her phone.

There was a message from Kishan.

Good morning, ma. Have a good day. Call me when you are free. I want to hear about your new assignment.

Vaasanthi smiled and typed a reply.

Good morning, daddy. I will call you this evening.

She placed the phone beside her notebook and opened the file.

There was work to do. There were stories to discover.

There were people whose experiences might help others find courage, clarity, or hope.

And there were relationships in her own life that she would have to keep nurturing, one ordinary day at a time.

She had once believed that independence meant never needing anyone.

Now she was learning something different.

Independence meant having the courage to stand on her own feet.

But wisdom meant understanding that she did not have to stand alone.

And love, she was beginning to realise, was not proved only by how deeply one felt.

It was proved by how consistently one showed up.

The first step had brought her father back into her life.

The next steps would determine what they built together.

And somewhere ahead, beyond the newsroom, beyond the familiar faces and the relationships she was slowly learning to understand, life was preparing another chapter for Vaasanthi.

She did not know its shape yet. For now, she had enough to do.

She had a family to rediscover.....A career to build.

And a promise to herself that she would never again allow silence to make every decision on her behalf.

Chapter 16:

The assignment arrived on a Monday morning.

Vaasanthi was reviewing the list of potential guests for the new interview series when Mr. Menon walked towards her desk with a thin file in his hand.

"Have you finalised the format?" he asked.

"I have a few ideas, sir. I would like to discuss them with you."

"Good. We will do that. But before we begin, I have someone I want you to meet."

He placed the file on her desk.

The name printed on the first page was **Arunachalam Narayanan**.

Vaasanthi read the brief description below it.

Founder of a rural education initiative. Former government schoolteacher. Has helped establish community learning centres in several villages across three districts.

She looked up.

"Is he our first guest?"

"He is one of the people we are considering. His work is impressive, but I don't want a conventional interview about achievements. I want our viewers to understand the person behind the work."

"What made him begin?"

"Exactly. And what made him continue when it became difficult? What did he sacrifice? What did he misunderstand? What would he do differently if he had the chance to begin again?"

Mr. Menon paused.

"These are not questions that can be answered by reading a profile on the internet."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"Then I will have to speak to him before the interview."

"Not just speak to him. Understand the world he comes from. Find out what his work means to the people it serves. Don't go there looking only for an inspiring story. Go there prepared to discover the truth, even if the truth is complicated."

She nodded.

"I understand, sir."

He began to leave, then turned back.

"One more thing, Vaasanthi."

"Yes?"

"Your ability to connect with people is becoming one of your strengths. But don't let that make you forget your responsibility as a journalist. Empathy is important. So are facts, fairness, and the courage to ask uncomfortable questions."

"I will remember that."

"Good. I am looking forward to seeing what you make of this."

When he walked away, Vaasanthi opened the file again.

She had interviewed singers, composers, doctors, athletes, social workers, and people whose lives had been shaped by extraordinary circumstances. Each conversation had taught her something different.

But this assignment felt different.

Until now, most of her interviews had taken place in a studio, where the guest came into her world.

This time, she would have to enter someone else's.

And she had a feeling that the journey would teach her more than she expected.

Arunachalam Narayanan was sixty-two years old.

He had spent thirty-four years teaching mathematics and science in government schools before retiring. During his final decade as a teacher, he had begun organising evening learning sessions for children who could not afford private tuition.

What started with seven children sitting on the floor of a small village library had gradually grown into a network of learning centres.

He had never established an expensive institution. There were no grand buildings bearing his name, no elaborate advertisements, and no photographs of him standing beside prominent personalities.

The centres functioned in modest rooms, community halls, and, in a few villages, under the shaded verandas of local houses.

The children came after school.

Some arrived with carrying proper schoolbags. Others brought notebooks tied together with string. A few shared textbooks with their siblings.

The teachers were volunteers, retired educators, college students, and local residents who had been trained to support the children.

The objective was simple: no child should be forced to abandon education merely because the circumstances of the family made learning difficult.

Vaasanthi read the available reports, spoke to two former colleagues of Arunachalam, and contacted the coordinator of one of the learning centres.

She discovered that the initiative had survived financial difficulties, disagreements within the founding team, and even a period when Arunachalam had seriously considered closing it.

That last detail caught her attention.

Why had he considered giving up?

And what had made him continue?

She wrote the questions in her notebook.

Then she added another. *Who helped him when he needed help?*

She looked at the question for a moment.

It was something she had begun to ask herself whenever she read about a successful person.

Stories often described individuals as though they had achieved everything through determination alone. The world admired the person who refused to give up, the leader who overcame obstacles, and the achiever who continued when others would have stopped.

But very few success stories examined the people who stood beside those individuals during their weakest moments.

Who had encouraged them when they doubted themselves?

Who had disagreed with them and helped them recognise their mistakes?

Who had forgiven them when their ambition had caused pain?

And who had quietly sacrificed something so that another person could continue pursuing a dream?

Vaasanthi believed these questions deserved attention.

After all, no human being lived entirely outside the influence of other human beings.

Even the strongest person had, at some point, depended on someone.

Sometimes that dependence was visible.

Sometimes it was hidden inside an ordinary act of kindness that nobody remembered to mention.

The day before the interview, Vaasanthi travelled with Ravi to a learning centre on the outskirts of the city, where Arunachalam had agreed to meet her.

The centre occupied two rooms beside a small community library.

The paint on the walls had faded. A ceiling fan turned slowly overhead. Along one wall stood a wooden shelf filled with textbooks, dictionaries, old newspapers, and notebooks donated by former students.

When Vaasanthi entered, a group of children were solving mathematics problems.

One boy was counting on his fingers.

A girl sitting beside him whispered something and pointed to his notebook.

The boy shook his head.

She took his pencil, wrote a few numbers on a piece of paper, and pushed it towards him.

He studied the numbers, smiled, and began solving the problem again.

Vaasanthi watched them for a few seconds.

Nobody had instructed the girl to help him. Nobody had offered her a reward for doing so.

She had simply noticed that someone beside her was struggling.

And she had responded.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Vaasanthi turned.

Arunachalam was standing behind her.

He was a lean man with silver hair, a neatly pressed shirt, and the kind of gentle expression that made people feel comfortable speaking to him.

"What is beautiful, sir?" she asked.

"The girl helping the boy. Yesterday, he helped her with a science assignment. Today, she is helping him with mathematics."

He smiled.

"That is how I want these children to learn. Not only to become an educated, but also to become people who notice when someone else needs help."

Vaasanthi nodded.

"Do you believe education can teach kindness?"

"Education can create the conditions for it. But kindness must be practised. A person may know many things and still remain indifferent to the suffering of others."

He gestured towards the room.

"Come. I will show you around."

He introduced her to the volunteers, explained how the centre functioned, and showed her the small library where children could borrow books without paying any fee.

On a table near the window lay a collection of old notebooks.

"Are these records of the centre?" Vaasanthi asked.

"Some of them. The first children who came here used to write down what they learned each day. I asked them to keep the notebooks because I wanted them to understand how much progress they were making."

He picked up one of the older books.

The pages were worn, and the handwriting was uneven.

"This boy is now an engineer," he said, pointing to a name on the cover. "He still visits us whenever he comes to the village."

He replaced the notebook carefully.

"There are many such stories. But I don't want you to think that every child who comes here will become an engineer or a doctor. That is not the measure of our work."

"What is the measure, then?"

"Whether a child begins to believe that learning belongs to them too."

He looked towards the room where the children were studying.

"For some children, that belief is the first thing they need."

Vaasanthi wrote the sentence in her notebook.

She knew it would remain with her long after the interview was over.

The formal interview took place the following afternoon in the studio.

Arunachalam sat opposite Vaasanthi, his hands resting comfortably on his knees. He appeared neither nervous nor eager to impress. When the cameras began rolling, he looked directly at her and waited for the first question.

Vaasanthi began with his early years as a teacher.

He spoke about overcrowded classrooms, children who came to school without breakfast, and parents who sometimes withdrew their children to help with household work or earn money.

He described the frustration of watching talented students fall behind because they lacked basic learning support.

"What was the moment that made you decide to start the evening classes?" Vaasanthi asked.

Arunachalam thought for a while.

"It was not one dramatic moment. I wish I could tell you that I saw something extraordinary one morning and immediately decided to change the world. The truth is more ordinary."

He smiled.

"There was a boy in my class who was intelligent but consistently performed poorly in examinations. One day, I asked him why he never completed his homework. He told me that he shared a small room with his family,

that his younger siblings made it difficult to concentrate, and that there was no electricity for part of the evening."

"What did you do?"

"I asked him to come to school a little earlier. I would help him then."

"Did that solve his problem?"

"It helped him. But it also made me realise that there were many other children with similar difficulties. I could help one child by changing my routine. But what would happen to the others?"

He paused.

"Sometimes, we see a problem and think we need a large solution. But perhaps we should first ask what small thing we can do with the resources already available to us."

Vaasanthi leaned forward slightly.

"So the learning centre began because you decided to do something small?"

"Yes. And because a few other people decided to help."

He described how a retired librarian had offered the use of a room, how another teacher had volunteered twice a week, and how a local shopkeeper had donated notebooks.

"Nobody contributed a great deal," he said. "But together, they contributed enough to begin."

Vaasanthi listened.

"Was it difficult to convince people?"

"Very difficult. Some people believed that children who struggled in school simply weren't working hard enough. Others said that parents should take responsibility. Some thought the classes would fail within a few months."

"And how did you respond?"

"At first, I argued with them. I tried to prove that I was right."

"What happened?"

"I became tired, and so did they."

He smiled at the memory.

"Later, I realised that arguing about the idea was not going to make the idea successful. I needed to demonstrate that it could help children. So I concentrated on the work. Gradually, the results became visible, and a few people who had opposed us began to support us."

"Did everyone change their opinion?"

"No. And that was another lesson I had to learn."

He looked at her calmly.

"You can explain your intentions honestly. You can show people what you are trying to do. But you cannot force everyone to understand you. Your responsibility is to make a sincere effort, listen to reasonable criticism, correct your mistakes, and continue the work if you still believe it is worthwhile."

Vaasanthi felt the importance of the distinction.

A sincere effort did not mean that every disagreement had to end in agreement.

It did not mean that a person had to spend a lifetime proving their goodness to those determined not to see it.

It meant being willing to explain, to listen, and to change where change was needed.

And after doing so, it meant accepting that the final response was not entirely in one's hands.

She moved to the next question.

"You mentioned that there was a time when you considered closing the centre. What happened?"

For the first time during the interview, Arunachalam's expression became serious.

"That was one of the most difficult periods of my life."

The learning centre had been operating for almost six years when the difficulty began.

Until then, the work had expanded steadily. More children were attending, additional volunteers had joined, and the team had begun planning two new centres in neighbouring villages.

But growth brought responsibilities that the original group had not fully anticipated.

The cost of maintaining the centres increased. Volunteers had different ideas about how the work should be organised. Some wanted to expand quickly, while others believed the existing centres needed stronger foundations before any further growth.

Arunachalam was caught between them.

He had always been a teacher first. He understood children, classrooms, and the patience required to explain a difficult concept. He was less experienced in managing an organisation with competing expectations.

He made decisions too quickly.

He assumed that people who disagreed with him did not understand the purpose of the initiative.

He worked longer hours and expected others to do the same.

Eventually, two of the original volunteers resigned.

One of them, a woman named Malathi, had been instrumental in organising the learning materials and training new volunteers. She had supported Arunachalam from the beginning, often spending evenings at the centre after completing her own work.

When she disagreed with his decision to open another centre before securing sufficient funding, he dismissed her concerns in front of the others.

She did not argue.

She simply stopped attending the meetings.

"At that time, I believed I was protecting the work," Arunachalam told Vaasanthi. "I thought that if I allowed every disagreement to delay us, we would never grow."

"Did you speak to Malathi afterwards?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He took a breath.

"Because I expected her to understand why I had made the decision. I thought she would eventually return when she realised I was right."

"And did she?"

"No."

The answer was quiet.

"She did not return for several months. During that period, I became increasingly frustrated. I felt she had abandoned the work at a critical time. I told myself that perhaps she had never been as committed as I believed."

Vaasanthi watched him carefully.

"What changed your mind?"

"A conversation with another volunteer. He asked me whether I had ever considered that Malathi might have left because she was hurt by the way I had spoken to her."

Arunachalam lowered his eyes briefly.

"I was offended by the question. I told him that the future of the children was more important than one person's feelings."

He paused.

"Then he asked me something I could not answer."

"What was it?"

"He asked, 'If the children are important enough for us to protect them from being discouraged, why is Malathi's dignity less important simply because she is an adult?'"

Vaasanthi felt a small shiver of recognition.

The question carried a truth that extended far beyond a learning centre.

How often did people justify hurting someone because they believed their own objective was important?

How often did they treat another person's feelings as an inconvenience to be dealt with later?

And how often did they forget that the manner in which they pursued a good purpose was also part of the purpose itself?

Arunachalam continued.

"I had no answer. I realised that I had been so concerned about the future of the centre that I had stopped paying attention to the people who were helping me build it."

"What did you do then?"

"I called Malathi."

He smiled faintly.

"She did not answer the first time. I waited a day and called again. This time, she answered."

"What did you say?"

"I told her that I wanted to speak to her. She said she had nothing more to discuss with me."

"How did you respond?"

"I told her that I understood why she might feel that way, but I still wanted an opportunity to apologise. I said she did not have to agree to return to the centre. I only wanted to acknowledge that I had treated her unfairly."

He paused.

"She agreed to meet me."

Their meeting took place in the small library where the first evening classes had begun.

Malathi arrived carrying a notebook. She sat across from Arunachalam and waited.

He had prepared what he intended to say. On the way to the library, he had rehearsed his apology several times.

But when she sat before him, he realised that the most important thing was not to deliver a perfect speech.

It was to stop defending himself.

He told her that he had been wrong to dismiss her concerns. He acknowledged that he had embarrassed her in front of the team and that he had treated her disagreement as disloyalty.

He did not ask her to forget what had happened.

He did not explain his good intentions as though they cancelled the hurt he had caused.

He simply apologised. Malathi listened without interrupting.

Then she told him how the incident had affected her.

She had not left because she no longer cared about the children. She had left because she felt that her years of contribution had become invisible the moment she disagreed with him.

She had supported his decisions through difficult periods, yet he had treated one disagreement as proof that she did not understand the work.

"I was willing to accept that we might have different opinions," she told him. "I was not willing to accept that my opinions could be dismissed without being heard."

Arunachalam said nothing.

For once, he allowed the silence to remain without rushing to fill it with explanations.

When she finished, he said, "You deserved to be heard. I am sorry I did not listen."

Malathi looked at him for a long moment. Then she asked whether the centre was still planning to expand.

He explained the situation honestly, including the financial difficulties and the disagreements within the team.

She listened and offered several suggestions.

They did not resolve every problem that day. Malathi did not immediately return to her former role, and Arunachalam did not suddenly become an excellent administrator.

But the conversation changed something. They could speak to each other again.

Over the following weeks, they exchanged ideas, reviewed the finances, and revised the expansion plan. Malathi eventually agreed to help with the organisation of the existing centres, though she established clearer boundaries around her time and responsibilities.

The work continued. More importantly, Arunachalam changed the way he led.

He began asking volunteers for their views before making major decisions. He learned to distinguish disagreement from disloyalty. He accepted that a leader who never listened to criticism was not necessarily strong; sometimes, he was simply afraid of being wrong.

"And that," Arunachalam said during the interview, "was the period when I understood that the people helping you achieve a purpose are not tools for achieving it. They are part of the purpose itself."

The studio was silent for a moment.

Vaasanthi knew she had found the heart of the interview.

But she also knew there was another question she needed to ask.

"Sir, what would have happened if you had never called Malathi?"

He considered it.

"The centre might have continued. Another volunteer might have taken her place. Perhaps we would even have opened more centres."

He looked directly at Vaasanthi.

"But I would have carried the knowledge that I had lost a valuable relationship without making a sincere effort to repair it. I would have spent years believing that she had abandoned us, without acknowledging that I had given her a reason to leave."

He paused.

"That is a burden I no longer carry. Not because I know she will always agree with me, but because I know I tried to make things right. I apologised. I listened. I changed what I could."

Vaasanthi felt the words settle inside her.This was the very distinction she had been trying to understand.

A person could not guarantee the survival of every relationship.

But they could choose not to let pride prevent an honest attempt.

They could acknowledge their own mistakes.

They could give the other person an opportunity to speak.

They could make the call, send the message, request the conversation, or offer the apology.

And if the other person still chose to remain distant, they could accept that outcome knowing they had not allowed their own hesitation to make the decision for them.

Arunachalam had not saved every relationship in his life.

But he had learned not to abandon one without first examining his own part in its failure.

Vaasanthi looked down at her notes. Then she looked back at him.

"Thank you, sir. I think that may be one of the most important things you have shared today."

He smiled.

"I hope it is useful to someone who needs to hear it."

The red recording light remained on.

For a moment, neither spoke. And Vaasanthi did not rush to ask the next question.

The interview was broadcast three days later.

The response was stronger than the team had anticipated.

Viewers appreciated Arunachalam's work, but many wrote in about the conversation with Malathi. Some recognised similar experiences in their workplaces. Others spoke about friendships that had deteriorated because one disagreement had been mistaken for betrayal.

One message came from a woman who had worked with a charitable organisation for nearly a decade.

I stopped speaking to the person who founded our group because I felt my contribution was never respected. I have often wondered whether I should have spoken to him before leaving. After watching this interview, I think I will try. I do not know whether we can work together again, but I would like to clear the misunderstanding.

Vaasanthi read the message twice.

She did not know what would happen between those two people.

Perhaps they would rebuild their working relationship.

Perhaps they would simply understand each other's perspectives and part on better terms.

Perhaps the other person would not be ready to speak.

None of those outcomes was within her control. But the woman had decided to try.

That mattered.

Another message came from a young man who had stopped speaking to a close friend after a disagreement over money.

I always thought the first person to apologise would look weak. Now I am beginning to understand that I may be protecting my pride at the cost of a friendship.

Vaasanthi leaned back in her chair. This was what she had hoped the new series might achieve.

Not to tell viewers how to live. Not to turn every guest into a moral authority.

But to offer honest human experiences that allowed people to examine their own lives.

Sometimes, a person did not need someone to tell them what they should do.

They needed to hear another person describe an experience that resembled their own.

They needed to recognise themselves in a story.

And perhaps, after that recognition, they needed only a little courage.

That evening, Vaasanthi reached home to find Kishan sitting in the living room with Radha.

They were looking through an old album. She stopped at the entrance.

The photograph album had not been opened in years. It contained pictures from her childhood, family gatherings, school celebrations, and trips that she barely remembered.

Kishan was holding a photograph of Vaasanthi at about six years old, standing beside a birthday cake.

"Look at this," he said when he noticed her.

She came closer.

"I remember that dress."

"Your mother made it," he said.

Radha smiled.

"You refused to wear anything else for nearly a month."

"I did not!"

"You did. You wanted to wear it to school, to the market, everywhere."

Kishan laughed. Vaasanthi took the photograph from him.

She remembered the dress now. It had small blue flowers, and she had believed it was the most beautiful dress in the world.

"Do you remember this birthday, Daddy?"

"Of course."

"What did you give me?"

He looked at the picture and frowned thoughtfully.

"A doll, I think."

"A doll?" Vaasanthi asked. "I don't remember that."

"You carried it everywhere," Radha said. "You even made me keep a small chair for it at the dining table."

Kishan laughed.

"That sounds like you."

Vaasanthi smiled, but the smile slowly faded. She looked at the photograph again.

For years, her memories of her father had been divided into two parts.

There was the little girl who had once been happy with him. And there was the older girl who had learned to live without him.

She had often wondered whether the first part of her life had been real or whether she had somehow misunderstood the affection she remembered.

But now, She is sitting in front of her parents who are sitting side by side. she understood something. The happy memories had been real.

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The hurt that followed had also been real. One did not cancel the other.

She could acknowledge that her father had missed important years of her life without pretending that he had never loved her.

She could accept that her mother had been deeply hurt without concluding that every decision made in that pain had been right.

And she could love both of them without being required to deny what had happened.

It was a more difficult understanding than simply deciding who was right and who was wrong.

But it was also a more honest one.

She placed the photograph back in the album.

"Daddy, we should arrange these pictures properly. There are so many that I don't remember."

Kishan looked delighted and said, "I have more at home."

"Then bring them."

He glanced at Radha, almost as though seeking permission.

Radha noticed the gesture.

"Why are you looking at me? Bring them," she said. "We will have to find a place for all of them."

Kishan smiled.

"All right."

Vaasanthi watched them exchange the small, ordinary words.

There was still awkwardness between them. Sometimes Kishan paused before speaking, uncertain whether a familiar joke would be welcome. Sometimes Radha became quiet when a memory brought back an old hurt.

They were not the couple they had been fifteen years ago.

They were two people attempting to build a new understanding from the remains of an old relationship.

But they were trying.

And every time one of them chose to continue a conversation instead of withdrawing into silence, Vaasanthi felt that something precious was being protected.

Not the past.... But the possibility of a future.

Later that night, Vaasanthi was preparing for bed when she noticed a message from an old college friend named Nisha.

They had been close during their university years. Nisha had been among the few people who had encouraged Vaasanthi to pursue journalism when others questioned her choice.

After graduation, their lives had gradually moved in different directions. Vaasanthi entered the news industry, working long hours and travelling for assignments. Nisha took a corporate job in another city.

At first, they exchanged messages regularly. Then the messages became occasional.

Eventually, their conversations stopped altogether. There had been no quarrel.

No betrayal. No single moment when either of them had decided that the friendship should end.

Life had simply become busy.

Nisha's message read:

Hi, Vaasanthi. I was thinking about our college days today. I hope you are doing well. I saw your recent interview series. You are doing wonderful work. Very proud of you.

Vaasanthi smiled. She began typing a reply.

Thank you, Nisha! Hope you are doing well too.

She looked at the message.

It was polite. It was appropriate. It was also the kind of response that might lead to two more polite messages before the conversation faded again.

She could almost hear her old habits speaking.

You are busy. She is busy. There is no need to make a big deal out of an old friendship. You can speak properly some other time.

Some other time. The phrase had once seemed harmless.

Now she understood how easily it could become a permanent postponement.

She remembered Nisha sitting beside her in college, sharing notes before an examination. She remembered the day she had received her first job offer, when Nisha had called her and celebrated as though the achievement belonged to them both.

She remembered how Nisha had once told her, "When you become a famous journalist, don't forget the people who knew you before you became one."

At the time, Vaasanthi had laughed.

She had never imagined that the friendship itself might become something she would have to remember to preserve.

She deleted her reply. Then she typed another.

Thank you, Nisha. Your message made me very happy. I have been thinking about our college days too. I am sorry we let so much time pass without speaking properly. Are you free this weekend? I would love to call you and hear how life has been treating you.

She read it once. For a second, she hesitated.

What if Nisha was too busy?

What if she replied politely but did not want to reconnect?

What if the friendship had become nothing more than a pleasant memory?

Then Vaasanthi recognised the questions for what they were.

They were possibilities, not reasons to remain silent.

She sent the message. The reply did not arrive immediately.

Vaasanthi placed her phone on the bedside table and began arranging her clothes for the next day.

A few minutes later, the phone vibrated.

Saturday evening would be lovely! I have missed our conversations.

Vaasanthi read the sentence and felt an unexpected rush of happiness.

She sat on the edge of the bed.

There had been no dramatic reconciliation. No long apology. No confrontation about who had failed to keep in touch.

There had simply been an invitation. And an equally willing response.

A friendship that had not been lost through anger had nearly faded through neglect.

It had taken only one message to give it another chance.

Vaasanthi wondered how many other relationships were waiting quietly in people's phones, address books, memories, and unfinished conversations.

How many people were thinking of an old friend but waiting for the other person to make contact?

How many brothers and sisters had not spoken properly in years?

How many former colleagues had parted on good terms but never found the time to reconnect?

How many people assumed that silence meant indifference, when perhaps the other person was equally uncertain about how to begin?

She could not answer those questions. But she knew one thing.

She no longer wanted to allow a meaningful relationship to disappear merely because she had failed to make time for it.

She would not always succeed.

There would be days when work consumed her attention. There would be misunderstandings she could not immediately resolve. There might be people who did not wish to reconnect.

But whenever a relationship mattered to her, she wanted to make a conscious effort.

Not out of fear....Not out of guilt.

And not because she believed she was responsible for keeping every bond alive by herself.

She wanted to do it because she had finally understood the value of trying.

On Saturday evening, Vaasanthi called Nisha.

The first few minutes were filled with the familiar questions people asked after a long gap.

How were their families?

Where were they living?

How was work?

Had anything changed?

Then, gradually, the conversation found its old rhythm.

They spoke about their college lecturers, the examinations they had worried about, the canteen food they had complained about, and the ambitions they had once discussed with absolute certainty.

At one point, Nisha laughed so loudly that Vaasanthi moved the phone away from her ear.

"What?" Vaasanthi asked.

"Do you remember how you used to practise your news reading in the hostel corridor?"

Vaasanthi covered her face.

"Please don't remind me."

"You would stand in front of the mirror and read the same paragraph twenty times."

"I was trying to improve."

"You were trying to become the next great newsreader before breakfast."

They both laughed. Then Nisha's voice softened.

"Seriously, Vaasanthi. I am happy for you."

"Thank you."

"No, I mean it. I remember how determined you were. Everyone had an opinion about what you should do, but you kept going."

Vaasanthi looked towards the window.

"There were times when I wondered whether I had chosen the right path."

"Of course. Everyone wonders that sometimes."

"I think I have learned a lot in the last few years."

"About journalism?"

"About people. About life. About relationships."

She paused.

"And about how easily we can lose something without ever deciding to lose it."

Nisha was quiet.

"That is true," she said at last. "I suppose we did that with our friendship."

"Perhaps. But we are speaking now."

"Yes, we are."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"And I don't want us to wait another two years before the next conversation."

"Agreed."

"Then we should make a rule."

"What rule?"

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"That if either of us thinks about the other, we should simply call."

Nisha laughed.

"That sounds suspiciously like a rule made by a journalist."

"It is a very practical rule."

"Fine. I agree."

They continued speaking for another forty minutes.

When the call ended, Vaasanthi remained seated for a while, smiling at the quiet room.

She had begun the evening expecting a pleasant conversation.

She had ended it feeling that a part of her past had returned—not in the form of an old photograph or a memory, but as a living relationship with the possibility of growing again.

She opened her notebook and wrote:

Some relationships break because of conflict. Others fade because we stop making space for them.

We cannot always prevent distance. Life changes. Responsibilities increase. People move to different places and begin new chapters.

But distance does not always have to become disconnection.

Sometimes, all a friendship needs is for one person to say, "I was thinking of you. Shall we talk?"

She paused and underlined the final sentence.

Then she added one more thought.

I want to become a person who makes that call.

The following Monday, Mr. Menon called the interview team into the conference room.

The response to Arunachalam's episode had encouraged the channel to expand the new series. The management wanted to give it a regular time slot and develop a stronger identity for it.

Mr. Menon outlined the plan.

The series would explore people whose experiences offered insight into the choices that shaped their lives. Some guests would be well known; others would be people whose contributions had never received public recognition.

The interviews would be longer, allowing guests to speak beyond prepared answers.

There would be a research team, a field-reporting component, and a follow-up segment examining what had happened after the events described by the guests.

"This is not going to be another programme where we invite people to list their achievements," Mr. Menon said. "We want to understand the decisions behind those achievements. The mistakes, The sacrifices, The relationships. The moments when people nearly gave up, And the moments when they chose to begin again."

He looked at Vaasanthi.

"I would like you to lead the editorial development of the series."

For a moment, the room seemed to grow still.

Vaasanthi had expected additional responsibility. She had not expected to be asked to lead the editorial development so soon.

"Sir, I am grateful for the opportunity," she said. "I will do my best."

"I know you will. But I want you to understand something. This responsibility is not simply about asking good questions. You will have to work with researchers, coordinate with production, meet deadlines, and make decisions about which stories deserve attention. You will have to listen to people who disagree with you, and sometimes you will have to change your mind."

He smiled.

"In other words, you will have to do more than interview people who have learned from their experiences. You will have to learn from your own."

The team laughed softly. Vaasanthi smiled too.

"I understand, sir." She said.

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As the meeting continued, she listened carefully to the proposed schedule and responsibilities.

There was much she still had to learn.

She had never led a team of this size. She would have to manage conflicting priorities, make decisions under pressure, and accept that not every idea could be accommodated.

The role excited her. It also frightened her.

But she no longer believed that fear was proof that she was unprepared.

Sometimes fear simply meant that the next step required something new from her.

She made notes throughout the meeting, asked questions, and offered suggestions. By the time the discussion ended, she had begun outlining the first month's work.

Outside the conference room, Ravi walked beside her.

"Congratulations, madam."

She gave him a look.

"Don't start."

"Why not? You are now responsible for an entire series."

"I am responsible for helping it succeed. That is different."

"Of course. And I am responsible for carrying the camera."

"Exactly."

"And for reminding you to eat lunch when you forget."

She laughed.

"That responsibility is more important than the camera."

"Finally, some recognition."

They walked towards the newsroom. After a few steps, Ravi became serious.

"You know, Vaasanthi, there is something I admire about you."

She turned towards him.

"What is it?"

"You are changing, but you are not losing yourself."

She did not respond immediately.

He continued.

"Some people become successful and start believing they have all the answers. Others become so concerned about being liked that they stop making difficult decisions. You seem to be learning how to listen without giving up your judgment."

Vaasanthi considered his words.

"I hope I can continue doing that."

"You will make mistakes."

"I know."

"People will criticise you."

"I know that too."

"And sometimes you will have to make decisions that disappoint people."

She sighed.

"Thank you for making my promotion sound so wonderful."

Ravi laughed.

"I am not trying to discourage you. I am reminding you that leadership is not about keeping everyone happy."

He paused.

"It is about doing what you believe is right, listening when someone shows you that you may be wrong, and having the courage to correct yourself."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"That sounds suspiciously like something one of my interviewees would say."

"Perhaps I should become your next guest."

"Let us see whether you have enough life experience to qualify."

"I have worked with you for two years. Surely that is sufficient."

She laughed, and the sound followed them into the newsroom.

But she carried his words with her.

Leadership, like relationships, would require her to take the first step many times.

Sometimes she would have to initiate a difficult conversation. Sometimes she would have to admit a mistake.

Sometimes she would have to defend a decision.

And sometimes she would have to recognise that the best way forward was to listen to someone whose perspective differed from her own.

The principles she was learning at home were not separate from the principles she would need at work.

They were becoming part of the same person.

That evening, Vaasanthi returned home and found her parents sitting together on the veranda.

Kishan had brought a newspaper. Radha was watering the plants.

They looked up as she approached.

"How was your day?" Radha asked.

Vaasanthi sat beside her.

"I have some news."

Kishan folded the newspaper.

"Good news?"

"I think so. Mr. Menon has asked me to lead the editorial development of our new interview series."

Radha's face brightened.

"That is wonderful!"

Kishan smiled proudly.

"I knew you would do well."

Vaasanthi looked at him.

"You have only recently started learning about my work."

"That is true," he said. "But I am learning quickly."

She laughed.

Radha sat down beside them.

"What will you have to do?"

Vaasanthi explained the responsibilities, the new schedule, and the kind of interviews the team hoped to develop.

Her father listened attentively, asking about the research process and the challenges of coordinating a team.

At one point, he said, "It sounds like you will have to depend on many people."

"Yes."

"Then remember to appreciate them. When work succeeds, the person in charge often receives the recognition. But the work itself may depend on many people whose names are never mentioned."

Vaasanthi looked at him with surprise.

"That is a good point, Daddy." She admired her father.

He smiled.

"I have learned a few things in my life."

Radha glanced at him. "Not all of them at the right time."

The remark was gentle, but the meaning was unmistakable.

For a fraction of a second, Kishan's smile faded.

Vaasanthi watched him, wondering whether he would become defensive.

Instead, he nodded.

"That is true," he said quietly. "Not all of them at the right time."

Radha looked at him.

There was no dramatic apology, no elaborate explanation.

But Kishan had allowed her words to remain without turning them into another argument.

Radha returned to watering the plants.

After a moment, she asked whether he could help her move a pot that had become too heavy.

He stood up immediately.

"Of course."

Vaasanthi watched them carry the pot together.

They were learning.

Not perfectly. Not without memories.

But sincerely. And perhaps sincerity was what gave their new beginning its strength.

That night, before sleeping, Vaasanthi wrote one final entry in her notebook.

Today I understood something about the first step.

It is not always a phone call to someone we have lost.

Sometimes it is a conversation with someone who works beside us.

Sometimes it is the willingness to listen to a different opinion.

Sometimes it is accepting responsibility for a decision.

Sometimes it is asking for help instead of pretending we can do everything alone.

And sometimes it is allowing someone who has hurt us to show, through consistent actions, that they are willing to change.

She looked at the page for a while.

Then she wrote:

Taking the first step is not a single act that we perform once and remember for the rest of our lives.

It is a way of living.

It is choosing not to let pride, fear, embarrassment, or convenience make every decision for us.

It is understanding that meaningful relationships require participation, not merely affection.

And it is knowing that we may not be able to save every relationship, but we can save ourselves from the regret of never having tried.

She closed the notebook.

Outside, the city continued its restless movement. Somewhere, people were returning home from work. Somewhere, a friend was considering whether to call another friend. Somewhere, a parent was wondering

how to begin a conversation with a child. Somewhere, two people who cared about each other were waiting for the other to speak first.

Vaasanthi could not reach all of them.

She could not know their stories, their wounds, or the reasons behind their silence.

But she could continue asking questions. She could continue listening.

She could continue telling stories that helped people recognise the choices still available to them.

And in her own life, she could keep practising the lesson that had changed everything.

When a relationship mattered, she would make an honest effort.

When she made a mistake, she would try to correct it.

When she needed to apologise, she would not allow pride to silence her.

When she needed to forgive, she would do so thoughtfully, without pretending that trust could be rebuilt through words alone.

And when another person refused to meet her halfway, she would remember that her responsibility was to make a sincere attempt, not to carry the entire relationship by herself.

She wanted to live without that particular regret.

The regret of looking back one day and wondering whether one small act of courage might have changed everything.

For years, Vaasanthi had thought her life was shaped by what other people had failed to do.

Now she was discovering the power of what she could choose to do herself.

The next chapter of her life was taking shape.

And this time, she intended to participate in writing it.

Chapter 17:

Success has a way of changing the questions people ask of us.

When Vaasanthi first entered the newsroom, the questions had been simple.

Could she deliver a report without losing her composure? Could she speak confidently before a camera? Could she meet a deadline, verify information, and make complicated events understandable to ordinary viewers?

She had worked hard to answer those questions.

Now, as she began leading the editorial development of the new interview series, the questions were becoming more difficult.

Could she make a decision when two people she respected disagreed?

Could she protect the quality of a story when there was pressure to make it more dramatic?

Could she acknowledge a mistake without allowing embarrassment to prevent her from correcting it?

And, perhaps most importantly, could she treat people fairly even when doing so meant disappointing someone?

Vaasanthi had learned to ask difficult questions of her interviewees.

Now life was preparing to ask a few of them of her.

The new series was scheduled to launch in six weeks.

The newsroom was busier than usual. Researchers were gathering information about prospective guests, producers were working on the visual identity of the programme, and the technical team was preparing a new studio arrangement.

Mr. Menon had given Vaasanthi considerable freedom in developing the editorial format, but he had also made it clear that the programme needed to be credible, engaging, and different from the interviews already available on television.

"We cannot afford to produce something that looks impressive for the first two weeks and becomes ordinary after that," he told her during one of their planning meetings. "The quality of the questions must give people a reason to return."

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Vaasanthi agreed.

She wanted the programme to explore not merely how people succeeded, but what their journeys revealed about courage, failure, responsibility, and relationships.

She proposed that each episode include three parts: the person's early life and defining experiences, the decisions that changed their journey, and the lessons they wished they had understood earlier.

Mr. Menon approved the structure.

"This is promising," he said. "But remember, the interview cannot feel like a lecture. Let the guest speak. Let the audience make its own discoveries."

That advice stayed with her.

She had no intention of presenting herself as someone who had understood life completely. She was still learning. The value of the programme, she believed, would come from allowing people to tell their stories honestly, including the parts they were not particularly proud of.

Her team consisted of five people.

Ravi handled the camera and production coordination. Ananya, a young researcher, gathered background information and verified the guests' public records. Pradeep worked on the programme's visual presentation, while Joseph managed the schedule and coordinated with the studio team.

The fifth member was Vikram, an experienced senior producer who had joined the channel several years before Vaasanthi.

Vikram was talented, confident, and accustomed to working independently. He had produced several successful programmes and was respected by the management.

He was also not entirely comfortable with the idea of Vaasanthi leading the editorial development.

He had never openly challenged her authority. In meetings, he listened, offered suggestions, and completed the tasks assigned to him. But sometimes his comments carried a faint suggestion that the new arrangement was an experiment rather than a genuine change in responsibility.

When Vaasanthi proposed a longer interview format, he remarked that viewers had limited patience.

When she suggested including ordinary people alongside prominent personalities, he questioned whether the programme would attract enough attention.

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And when she insisted that the research team verify personal claims before the interview, he said they were spending too much time preparing for conversations that were supposed to feel natural.

Vaasanthi did not take these disagreements personally. At least, that was what she told herself.

She believed that a good leader should be willing to listen to different opinions. Vikram had experience she did not yet possess, and dismissing his concerns merely because he disagreed with her would have been foolish.

But listening to another person did not mean accepting every suggestion.

The challenge was learning to distinguish useful criticism from resistance to change.

And she had not yet discovered the best way to do that.

The difficulty began with their second proposed guest.

His name was Dr. Madhusudan Rao, a well-known entrepreneur who had established a chain of affordable diagnostic centres across several cities.

His public reputation was excellent. He frequently spoke about healthcare accessibility, rural development, and the importance of making medical services affordable to lower-income families.

The channel's management was enthusiastic about the possibility of interviewing him.

Vikram was particularly interested.

"His name will attract viewers," he said during the editorial meeting. "He has built a successful business, he speaks well, and he has a strong public profile. This could become one of our best episodes."

Vaasanthi agreed that he was an interesting guest.

But Ananya's preliminary research had raised a concern.

Some of the company's former employees had publicly complained about delayed salary payments at two of its centres. There were also questions about the closure of a facility in a small town, where patients had reportedly struggled to obtain copies of their medical records after the closure.

The available information was incomplete. Some complaints had been disputed, and there was no clear evidence that Dr. Rao had personally directed any wrongdoing.

Ananya had therefore recommended further verification before the interview was confirmed.

When Vaasanthi raised the issue, Vikram leaned back in his chair.

"Every growing organisation has operational problems. That does not necessarily reflect the founder's character."

"I agree," Vaasanthi replied. "But we should understand the facts before we decide how to approach the interview."

"We are not conducting an investigation. We are interviewing a healthcare entrepreneur about his journey."

"We can do both responsibly. We can discuss his achievements and ask fair questions about concerns connected with his work."

Vikram shook his head.

"If we start questioning every successful person about every complaint made against their organisation, nobody will agree to come on the programme."

Vaasanthi looked at him.

"We should not treat an unverified complaint as a proven fact. But we should not ignore a relevant question simply because it may be uncomfortable."

The room became quiet.

Mr. Menon, who had been listening, intervened.

"Ananya, verify what can be verified. Separate confirmed facts from allegations. We will decide how to proceed when we have reliable information."

The meeting ended.

As the others began leaving, Vikram remained seated.

"Can I speak to you for a minute?" he asked Vaasanthi.

"Of course."

He waited until the room was empty.

"I want this programme to succeed," he said. "I hope you understand that."

"I do."

"Then you should know that relationships with guests matter. People agree to interviews because they trust the channel to treat them fairly. If they feel we are looking for controversy, they will stop cooperating."

"That is a valid concern."

He seemed surprised that she had agreed so quickly.

"But fairness must work both ways," she continued. "We should not accuse anyone without evidence, and we should not give anyone unquestioning praise simply because they are influential."

Vikram studied her for a moment.

"You have strong principles, Vaasanthi. That is good. But principles are easier to maintain when you are not responsible for keeping an entire programme running."

The words stung.

She wanted to tell him that she understood responsibility, that she had worked hard for this opportunity, and that she was not taking the assignment lightly.

Instead, she took a breath.

"Perhaps I still have a lot to learn about managing a programme," she said. "But I don't think we should abandon careful research because it makes our work more difficult."

Vikram gathered his papers.

"Fine. Let's see what the research tells us."

He left.

Vaasanthi remained seated for several seconds. She was not angry with him exactly.

She was unsettled by the possibility that he might be right about some things she had not yet considered.

What if she became so determined to protect her principles that she failed to understand the practical realities of the job?

What if she allowed her personal interest in human relationships to interfere with professional judgment?

And what if the programme failed because she insisted on an approach that sounded admirable but did not work in practice?

For the first time since receiving the assignment, she wondered whether she was ready for the responsibility.

Then she remembered something Mr. Menon had told her.

Leadership did not require her to know everything. It required her to be willing to learn, make decisions, and accept the consequences.

She returned to her desk and opened Ananya's research file.

There was work to do.

Over the next three days, Ananya and Vaasanthi examined the available information.

They contacted former employees who were willing to speak on record. They reviewed public statements issued by the company, checked the dates of the centre's closure, and sought clarification about the availability of patient records.

Some of the complaints appeared to arise from genuine administrative difficulties. Others could not be independently verified. The company had stated that salaries were delayed during a period of financial restructuring and that the affected employees had subsequently been paid.

The closure of the centre had also been explained as a consequence of mounting operating costs.

However, questions remained about how patients had been informed and how they could obtain their records.

Vaasanthi decided that the interview should not be cancelled simply because questions existed.

Nor should it proceed as though the questions did not exist.

She prepared a list of factual, neutral questions and sent them to the programme's editorial team for review. The questions did not presume wrongdoing. They asked Dr. Rao to explain the circumstances, describe the corrective measures taken, and discuss what he had learned from the difficulties.

When Vikram reviewed the draft, he frowned.

"These questions are too detailed."

"They are relevant to the organisation he leads."

"They will make him defensive."

"That is possible. But we can ask them respectfully."

Vikram placed the pages on her desk.

"Have you considered how this will affect our relationship with him?"

Vaasanthi looked at the questions. Then she looked at Vikram.

"Have you considered how it would affect our relationship with the audience if we knowingly avoided relevant questions?"

He did not answer immediately. Finally, he said, "You are the editorial lead. The decision is yours."

He walked away before she could respond. Vaasanthi sat still for a moment.

She had wanted him to understand her reasoning. Instead, she felt that he had withdrawn from the discussion altogether.

She could have called him back. She could have asked whether he had another suggestion.

But the deadline was approaching, and she was tired of defending a decision she believed was reasonable.

She sent the draft for final review. It was a small moment, barely noticeable in the busy newsroom.

Yet it was the first time she allowed an unresolved disagreement to remain unresolved simply because she did not want to continue the conversation.

She did not recognise the significance of that choice.

Not yet.

The interview took place the following Thursday.

Dr. Rao arrived punctually, greeted the team warmly, and appeared comfortable before the cameras.

He spoke eloquently about his childhood, his education, and his decision to enter the healthcare sector. He described the difficulties of establishing affordable diagnostic facilities and the resistance he had faced from people who believed low-cost services could not be financially sustainable.

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

He was an engaging speaker, and much of what he said was informative.

She asked about his early failures, the financial risks he had taken, and the people who had supported him when the business was struggling.

At one point, he spoke about his father, a small shopkeeper who had initially opposed his decision to become an entrepreneur.

"My father wanted me to take a secure job," Dr. Rao said. "He believed that a steady income was more important than an uncertain dream. For years, I thought he lacked confidence in me. Later, I understood that he was frightened of seeing me struggle."

Vaasanthi smiled faintly.

"Did you ever tell him that you understood his concerns?"

"Not immediately. I was too busy proving that I was right."

"What changed?"

Dr. Rao looked thoughtful.

"I realised that proving I was right did not require me to keep treating his concerns as an insult. He could be worried about my future and still love me. I had mistaken his fear for a lack of faith."

Vaasanthi felt the familiar echo of a lesson she had heard in a very different context.

People could misunderstand one another even when affection existed between them.

They could interpret concern as control, disagreement as rejection, and silence as indifference.

Sometimes, a relationship changed when someone became willing to consider a different explanation.

The interview continued.

When Vaasanthi reached the questions about the company's difficulties, she changed her tone slightly, becoming more precise.

"Dr. Rao, your organisation has received complaints from some former employees about salary delays during a period of financial difficulty. How did the company respond?"

He answered that the delays had occurred during restructuring and that the affected employees had eventually received their payments.

She asked what systems had been introduced to prevent similar problems.

He described changes in financial planning and internal communication.

Then she asked about the closure of the diagnostic centre and the concerns raised by patients who needed copies of their records.

Dr. Rao's expression tightened.

"The closure was an unfortunate business decision," he said. "We had to consolidate our operations. I believe the situation has been exaggerated in some reports."

"Can you explain what patients were advised to do if they needed their records after the closure?"

He gave a general answer about contacting the company's administrative office.

Vaasanthi asked whether there had been a formal process to help them.

He paused, then acknowledged that the communication could have been better.

"Looking back, we should have planned the transition more carefully," he said. "We were focused on the financial situation and did not adequately consider the inconvenience caused to some patients."

Vaasanthi nodded.

"Have you introduced a process for informing patients and ensuring they can access their records if a facility closes in the future?"

"Yes. We have made changes since then."

She asked him to explain those changes.

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He did.

The interview continued without an argument. Dr. Rao did not answer every question in the level of detail she had hoped for, but he acknowledged some shortcomings and explained his organisation's response.

When the cameras stopped rolling, he shook her hand.

"You ask difficult questions," he said.

"I hope they were fair ones."

"They were direct. I may not agree with every premise behind them, but I appreciate that you gave me the opportunity to respond."

Vaasanthi smiled and said, "That was important to us."

Dr. Rao left the studio.

Ravi began packing the equipment.

"That went well," he said.

Vaasanthi looked at him.

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. You asked the questions without turning the interview into an argument."

She nodded, though she did not feel entirely satisfied.

She had been careful to distinguish confirmed information from allegations. She had given Dr. Rao the opportunity to respond. She had not tried to embarrass him.

Yet she wondered whether the final episode would preserve that balance.

The interview was only one part of the work. The editing would determine how viewers experienced it.

And she knew that the temptation to create drama could sometimes become stronger after the cameras stopped rolling.

The first edited version was ready the following Tuesday. Vaasanthi watched it in the preview room with Ravi and Pradeep.

The opening was strong. The programme introduced Dr. Rao's background, showed the diagnostic centres, and included a few brief accounts from people who had benefited from the services.

The middle section contained the conversation about his father, the risks of entrepreneurship, and the lessons he had learned from early failures.

Then came the difficult questions.

The editor had placed the complaints about delayed salaries and the centre's closure close together. Several of Dr. Rao's responses had been shortened, while his brief acknowledgment that the communication could have been better was retained.

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The result was dramatic. It was also misleading.

The episode made it appear as though Dr. Rao had evaded almost every question, even though the full interview showed that he had provided explanations and described corrective steps.

Vaasanthi watched the sequence again.

"Who approved this edit?" she asked.

Pradeep looked uncomfortable.

"It came through the production desk. Vikram suggested making the middle section tighter."

"Did he review the full interview?"

"I believe so."

Vaasanthi paused the video.

She understood the argument for concise editing. A television programme could not include every minute of a long conversation.

But editing was not merely a matter of removing words.

It could change the meaning of what remained.

A person might speak for five minutes, acknowledge a problem, explain the circumstances, and describe the corrective action. If the final version retained only the problem and removed the explanation, the audience would receive a distorted impression.

Even if every remaining sentence was technically accurate, the overall presentation could still be unfair.

Vaasanthi felt a growing unease. She called Vikram into the preview room.

He arrived carrying his notebook.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. I have a concern about the edit."

He watched the sequence again.

"What is the problem?"

"Dr. Rao's answers have been shortened in a way that changes the impression of the conversation. The programme makes it seem as though he refused to explain the issues."

"We have limited time. The audience does not need every detail."

"I agree. But we cannot remove context that materially changes the meaning."

Vikram folded his arms.

"We have not fabricated anything."

"That is not enough. A programme can mislead people without inventing a sentence."

He looked at her.

"The difficult questions are the most interesting part of the episode. If we include all the explanations, the segment loses its impact."

"Then we need to find a way to make it engaging without making it unfair."

Vikram sighed.

"Vaasanthi, you are trying to make a television programme behave like a legal document."

"No. I am trying to make sure that the television programme respects the truth."

The words came out more sharply than she intended.

Vikram's face hardened.

"Fine. Rewrite the whole segment if you think you can do better."

He turned to leave.

"Vikram, wait."

He stopped but did not turn around.

Vaasanthi wanted to explain that she was not attacking him personally. She wanted to tell him that she respected his experience and that the disagreement was about the edit, not about his ability.

But she was tired, and his tone had made her defensive.

"We will discuss it in the editorial meeting," she said.

He walked out. Ravi looked at her.

"You were right about the edit."

She continued staring at the frozen frame.

"Then why do I feel as though I have made the situation worse?"

"Because being right about the work doesn't automatically make a difficult conversation easy."

Vaasanthi gave a small, weary smile.

"That sounds like something you have been waiting to tell me."

"I have been waiting for the right moment."

She laughed despite herself.

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Then her expression became serious again.

"I need to fix this."

Ravi nodded.

"Fix the edit first. Then think about the conversation."

She returned to the footage.

For the next two hours, she worked with Pradeep to restore the missing context while keeping the episode within the allotted time. They shortened some of the introductory material, removed repeated questions, and retained the key explanations from Dr. Rao.

The revised version was less sensational.

It was also more honest. When they finished, Vaasanthi sent it for final review.

But she knew that one problem remained. She had corrected the edit.

She had not corrected the relationship between herself and Vikram.

The next morning, Vaasanthi found an email from Mr. Menon asking her to meet him.

She entered his office carrying the revised episode notes.

"Sir, I have completed the changes to the edit."

He gestured towards a chair.

"I have seen the revised version. It is better."

"Thank you."

He studied her for a moment.

"Vikram has raised a concern about the way the team is working."

Vaasanthi felt her shoulders tighten.

"What concern, sir?"

"He believes editorial decisions are being made without enough discussion. He says his suggestions are being treated as resistance rather than professional input."

Vaasanthi looked down at her notes.

"That is not what I intended."

"I understand. But I want you to consider his perspective as well."

She nodded.

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"Do you think I handled the situation badly?"

Mr. Menon did not answer immediately.

"I think your decision about the edit was correct. The programme needed to preserve the context of the interview. But leadership is not only about making the correct decision. It is also about how you bring people through the decision."

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

"If someone offers a suggestion that you cannot accept, you should explain why. If there is a disagreement, you should make space for the discussion. And if you have spoken more sharply than you intended, you should be willing to acknowledge that."

He paused.

"At the same time, you must not confuse listening with surrendering your responsibility. You are the editorial lead. You are expected to make decisions, including decisions that not everyone likes."

"So what should I do now?"

"Speak to Vikram. Not to persuade him that you were right. He may already understand your reasons. Speak to him because the two of you need to work together."

Vaasanthi looked up.

"And if he still disagrees?"

"Then you may have to continue disagreeing professionally. A successful team does not require everyone to think alike. It requires people to respect one another enough to work through their differences."

She sat quietly for a moment.

Mr. Menon continued.

"Remember, Vaasanthi, you have been given authority over the programme. That does not mean you have to prove your authority in every conversation."

The sentence stayed with her long after she left his office.

She had been so concerned about protecting the quality of the programme that she had begun treating the disagreement as something she needed to win.

She had listened to Vikram's concerns at the beginning, but once she felt he was resisting her, she had stopped trying to understand what lay behind his position.

Perhaps he was worried about the programme's success. Perhaps he believed his experience was being undervalued.

Perhaps he was uncomfortable reporting to someone who had joined the channel later than he had.

Perhaps several of those things were true. Understanding his perspective would not require her to accept the misleading edit.

But it might help her find a better way to work with him.

She returned to her desk and looked towards Vikram's office.

For several seconds, she considered waiting until the next scheduled meeting.

She could send an email. She could ask Mr. Menon to mediate.

She could tell herself that the issue was professional and therefore did not need a personal conversation.

Then she recognised the familiar pattern. The conversation she needed to have was uncomfortable.

She was waiting for circumstances to make it easier. She remembered the words she had written in her notebook.

I want to become a person who makes that call.

This time, the call was not to an old friend or an estranged family member.

It was a conversation with a colleague she needed to understand.

She stood up and walked towards Vikram's cabin.

Vikram was reviewing the production schedule when she knocked.

"Do you have a few minutes?" she asked.

He looked up.

"Is there another issue with the episode?"

"No. The edit is final. I wanted to speak to you about what happened yesterday."

He put down his pen.

"All right."

Vaasanthi took a seat.

"I have been thinking about our conversation. I still believe the revised edit is the right decision, but I don't think I handled our disagreement as well as I could have."

Vikram looked at her cautiously.

"What do you mean?"

"When you suggested shortening the difficult section, I thought you were more concerned about making the episode dramatic than preserving the context. I reacted to that assumption instead of asking you to explain your reasoning."

She paused.

"I also spoke sharply. I am sorry for that."

Vikram remained silent. Vaasanthi continued.

"I want you to know that I value your experience. I don't expect you to agree with every decision I make, and I don't want you to stop offering suggestions because you think I will reject them."

He looked down at the schedule.

"Then why does it feel as though every time I raise a concern, you turn it into a discussion about principles?"

The question caught her off guard. She had expected him to defend himself.

Instead, he was telling her something she had not fully considered.

"Can you explain?" she asked.

He leaned back.

"When I suggested that the interviews should be shorter, I was thinking about the audience. I have worked on enough programmes to know that a strong interview can lose viewers if it moves too slowly. When I said the difficult section should be tighter, I wasn't asking you to remove the context entirely. I thought we could retain the important information in less time."

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Vaasanthi listened.

"Then I watched the first edit," he continued, "and I realised it had gone too far. I agreed that the revised version was better. But by then, I felt you had already decided that I was willing to compromise the truth for ratings."

She felt a quiet discomfort. She had not intended to make that judgment about him.

But perhaps her words had conveyed it.

"I am sorry," she said. "I should have asked you what you wanted to preserve before assuming what you wanted to remove."

Vikram looked at her. For the first time, his expression softened.

"I also should have explained my reasoning more clearly. I was frustrated, and I made it sound as though the questions themselves were the problem."

Vaasanthi nodded.

"They weren't. The problem was how the answers were edited."

"Agreed."

A silence followed. It was not the silence of people who had nothing left to say.

It was the silence that sometimes comes when two people have finally stopped preparing their defences long enough to hear one another.

After a moment, Vikram picked up his pen.

"I still think the programme needs a stronger pace."

"And I still think the context must be preserved."

He smiled faintly.

"So we disagree."

"Apparently."

"What do we do now?"

Vaasanthi smiled too. "We find a better way to do both."

He nodded.

"All right."

She stood up, then paused.

"Vikram, one more thing."

"Yes?"

"If you believe a decision I make is wrong, please tell me. I may not always agree with you, but I want to hear the reasoning. And if you think I have misunderstood your point, tell me that too."

He looked at her for a moment and said, "I will."

She left his office feeling lighter. Nothing extraordinary had happened.

Vikram had not become her closest friend. They had not discovered that they agreed on everything. Their professional differences would undoubtedly return.

But the conversation had prevented one disagreement from becoming a permanent judgment about each other's character.

And that was enough for now.

Later that afternoon, Ravi found Vaasanthi sitting near the editing desk.

"You look relieved," he said.

"I am."

"Did you solve the problem?"

"I think we solved part of it."

"That sounds more realistic."

She laughed.

Then she told him about her conversation with Vikram.

Ravi listened without interrupting.

When she finished, he said, "You know what I find interesting?"

"What?"

"You have spent months interviewing people about the importance of taking the first step. But today you took one yourself in a situation where you could easily have justified doing nothing."

Vaasanthi thought about it.

"I nearly didn't."

"But you did."

She looked towards Vikram's office.

"I think I had started treating him as an opponent rather than a colleague who disagreed with me."

"That happens."

"I was so determined not to compromise the quality of the programme that I forgot I could explain my position without making him feel that his experience had no value."

Ravi nodded.

"That is one of the hardest things about working with people. You can be right about the issue and still handle the conversation badly."

She smiled.

"Mr. Menon said almost exactly the same thing."

"Then perhaps I should ask for a raise. I seem to be giving management-level advice."

She laughed.

But after he left, she continued thinking about his words.

She had once believed that relationships depended mainly on how people felt about one another.

Now she was discovering that relationships also depended on how people behaved when they did not feel understood.

It was easy to be kind when everyone agreed. It was easy to be patient when there was no deadline.

It was easy to listen when another person's opinion did not threaten a decision she wanted to make.

The real test came when she felt defensive. When someone questioned her judgment.

When her pride wanted to respond before her mind had finished listening.

Those were the moments when a small pause could prevent a larger misunderstanding.

She wrote a note in her notebook.

Do not assume that disagreement means disrespect.

Then she added:

But do not use the desire to preserve a relationship as an excuse to avoid difficult truths.

She looked at the two sentences. They seemed to belong together.

A relationship needed respect. It also needed honesty.

One without the other could become a performance in which people remained pleasant while quietly losing trust.

The challenge was to speak truthfully without trying to diminish the person hearing it.

And to hear the truth without immediately treating it as an attack.

Vaasanthi closed the notebook.

She was beginning to understand that the first step was not always a dramatic gesture.

Sometimes, it was the decision to replace an assumption with a question.

The episode aired on Friday evening.

The response was encouraging. Viewers appreciated the interview, and several messages praised the channel for allowing Dr. Rao to address difficult questions without turning the programme into a confrontation.

Mr. Menon called the team together the following Monday.

"The episode has performed well," he said. "More importantly, the feedback suggests that viewers appreciated the balance. We asked questions, allowed the guest to respond, and did not confuse accountability with accusation."

He looked at Vaasanthi and said, "Good work."

She thanked him. Then he turned to Vikram.

"The pacing was also strong. We should retain that discipline in future episodes."

Vikram nodded. Vaasanthi glanced at him.

He gave her a small smile. It was not a grand moment of reconciliation.

No one in the room knew that they had had a difficult conversation or that their working relationship had nearly become more strained than necessary.

But they had learned something about working together.

Vaasanthi had learned to make room for experience without surrendering her judgment.

Vikram had learned that her insistence on fairness was not a personal challenge to his competence.

Neither had abandoned their perspective. They had simply learned to work with their differences more constructively.

As the meeting ended, Vikram approached her, "I have an idea for the next episode," he said.

"Tell me."

"I think we should include a short follow-up with someone who worked closely with the guest. Not to praise them, but to offer another perspective on the same journey."

Vaasanthi considered it.

"That could be interesting. We would need to be careful about the format, though. We shouldn't turn it into a comparison of personalities."

"Agreed. Perhaps we could focus on what the guest's journey looked like from the other person's side."

She smiled.

"Let's develop it."

Vikram nodded and walked away to prepare his proposal. Vaasanthi remained at the conference table for a moment.

The idea was a good one. And it had come from the very person whose suggestion she might once have dismissed too quickly.

She felt grateful that she had taken the time to listen. Not because it had guaranteed agreement.

Because it had allowed a useful idea to emerge from a difficult conversation.

That evening, Vaasanthi returned home to find Radha arranging some old photographs in a new album.

Kishan sat beside her, carefully writing dates on small labels.

They had begun organising the photographs over the previous week, and the task had gradually become a shared activity.

Some pictures made them laugh. Others brought back memories that neither had spoken about for years.

A few led to conversations that were difficult but necessary.

When Vaasanthi entered, Radha held up a photograph.

"Look at this one."

It showed Kishan standing beside a bicycle while a little Vaasanthi sat on the seat, gripping the handlebars with great determination.

Vaasanthi laughed.

"I remember that bicycle!"

"You refused to get down," Kishan said. "You wanted to ride it immediately."

"I was very brave."

"You were very impatient."

Radha smiled.

"He spent the whole afternoon running beside you because you wouldn't allow anyone else to hold the bicycle."

Vaasanthi looked at her father.

"Did I fall?"

"Several times."

"And what did you do?"

"I helped you get up."

She studied the photograph.

The memory came back in fragments: the hot afternoon, the dusty road, her father's hand holding the back of the bicycle, and the excitement of believing that she might soon ride it by herself.

"Why don't I remember all of this clearly?" she asked.

"Because you were little," Radha replied.

Vaasanthi nodded.

Then she asked, "Did I cry when I fell?"

"Sometimes," Kishan said. "Sometimes you got angry. Once you blamed the bicycle."

She laughed.

"That sounds like me."

He smiled.

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"But you always wanted to try again."

The sentence remained with her. She looked at the photograph once more.

As a child, she had fallen from the bicycle and allowed someone to help her get up. She had tried again because she believed that she could learn.

Somewhere along the way, life had taught her to be careful about relying on people.

She had become so determined not to be disappointed that she had stopped allowing herself to need anyone.

She had mistaken emotional independence for never reaching out.

Now she was learning to stand on her own feet without pretending that other people did not matter.

She placed the photograph in the album.

"Dad, we should find the picture of my first day at school."

"I have it somewhere."

"Then we must find it."

Radha looked at her daughter. "You seem very interested in these photographs now."

Vaasanthi smiled and said, "I am interested in knowing the parts of my life I don't remember."

Radha's expression softened.

"We will find them."

Vaasanthi sat beside her parents and began turning the pages.

For a while, they simply looked at the photographs.

There was no need to explain every feeling or resolve every memory.

They were sharing the same space, learning to speak, and discovering that the past could be remembered without allowing it to control every moment of the present.

And sometimes, that was enough.

Later that night, Vaasanthi called Nisha.

They had spoken the previous weekend and had agreed not to let another long gap develop between them.

This time, the conversation was brief. Nisha was preparing for a work presentation, and Vaasanthi had to

review the schedule for the next episode.

They exchanged a few updates and promised to speak again soon.

Before ending the call, Nisha said, "I am glad we started talking again."

"So am I."

"You know, I had thought about calling you many times."

Vaasanthi smiled.

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. I assumed you were busy. And after a while, I wondered whether it would feel strange to call after so long."

Vaasanthi leaned back in her chair.

"I had the same thoughts."

"So we were both waiting."

"Apparently."

Nisha laughed.

"Next time, let's not be so foolish."

"Agreed."

After the call, Vaasanthi remained quiet for a while.

She had been thinking about the importance of initiative as a way to prevent regret. But Nisha's words had reminded her of another truth.

Sometimes, both people wanted to reconnect. Neither was angry.

Neither had rejected the other. They were simply uncertain whether the other person still cared enough to welcome the conversation.

And in the absence of evidence, each person had quietly constructed a reason to remain silent.

She is probably busy. Perhaps she has moved on.

Maybe I will call next week. It might be awkward after so long.

Each thought seemed reasonable on its own.

Together, they had nearly allowed a meaningful friendship to disappear.

Vaasanthi opened her notebook.

Silence is not always a decision to end a relationship. Sometimes it is a series of small postponements that eventually begins to look permanent.

She paused.

Then she wrote:

When I care about someone, I want to be careful not to mistake my assumptions for their intentions.

If I do not know why someone has become distant, I can ask.

If I have made a mistake, I can acknowledge it.

If I miss someone, I can tell them.

And if they do not respond as I hope, I can respect their choice without blaming myself for having tried.

She underlined the final sentence.

It mattered to her.

She wanted to live with the confidence that she had made sincere efforts to preserve the relationships that mattered.

But she also wanted to understand that the responsibility for a relationship did not belong entirely to the person who was willing to reach out first.

A bond required two people.

The first step could open the door. The other person still had to decide whether to walk through it.

As the weeks passed, the new series began to establish its identity.

The team developed a stronger working rhythm. Vikram's experience helped improve the pacing of the interviews, while Vaasanthi's emphasis on research and thoughtful questioning strengthened the editorial content.

They continued to disagree, but the disagreements became more productive.

Instead of assuming the worst about each other's intentions, they began asking questions.

Instead of allowing frustration to grow into silence, they discussed problems before they became larger.

The work was not always easy.

There were deadlines that seemed impossible, guests who changed their schedules at the last minute, and episodes that required more editing than expected.

But the team was learning to function as a team.

Vaasanthi was learning to lead without believing she had to control every detail.

She began delegating responsibilities, encouraging the researchers to suggest questions, and asking Ravi for his observations after each recording.

She also learned to admit when she did not know something. The first time she did so in a meeting, she felt embarrassed.

A technical question arose about the best way to incorporate field footage into an interview. Vikram suggested one approach, while Pradeep proposed another.

Vaasanthi listened to both, but she was not confident enough to judge the technical details.

For a moment, she considered making a decision anyway. She was the editorial lead. Surely she was expected to have an answer.

Then she remembered the difference between authority and knowledge.

"I understand the editorial objective," she said, "but I don't know enough about the technical limitations to make the decision yet. Can you both explain the advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches?"

Vikram and Pradeep did so.

After listening, she asked a few more questions and made a decision.

The work moved forward. Nobody questioned her authority.

In fact, the team seemed more comfortable because she had made the basis of her decision clear.

That evening, she wrote another note.

I do not have to pretend to know everything in order to deserve responsibility.

I have to be willing to learn what I do not know and make the best decision I can with the information available.

She closed the notebook.

She was discovering that courage was not the absence of uncertainty.

It was the willingness to act responsibly while uncertainty remained.

And the same was true of relationships.

She could not always know how a conversation would end.

She could not predict whether an apology would be accepted or whether a friendship would return to its earlier closeness.

But she could decide whether to make an honest effort.

That decision belonged to her.

One evening, as Vaasanthi was leaving the office, Mr. Menon called her into his room.

"The series is doing well," he said.

She sat down.

"Thank you, sir. The whole team has worked hard."

"Yes, they have. And you have handled the responsibility well."

She smiled.

He opened a file.

"We are planning the next phase of the programme. I want to increase the number of episodes and introduce a field component. We will need someone who can coordinate the editorial team, maintain quality, and take responsibility for the overall direction."

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

"I would like you to prepare a proposal for the expanded format," he continued. "Include the staffing requirements, the production schedule, and the kind of stories we should pursue. Think beyond the next month. I want to know how you would build this over the next year."

For a moment, she felt the familiar mixture of excitement and apprehension.

A year.

It was a longer horizon than she had been asked to consider before.

She would have to think about budgets, staffing, training, editorial standards, and the sustainability of the programme. She would need to coordinate with people across departments and justify her recommendations to senior management.

It was a substantial responsibility.

"I will prepare the proposal, sir."

"Good. Take your time and think carefully. I am not looking for an impressive document. I am looking for a workable plan."

"I understand."

As she left his office, Vaasanthi walked more slowly than usual.

She had entered the newsroom years earlier hoping to prove that she deserved a place in journalism.

Now she was being asked to help shape a programme and plan its future.

She had not reached this point through one lucky opportunity.

She had arrived here through many small acts of effort: preparing for interviews, listening carefully, accepting criticism, learning from mistakes, and doing the work even when nobody was watching.

Her personal growth had not replaced her professional ambition.

It had strengthened it. She was still determined to succeed.

But success no longer meant reaching a position simply so that others would recognise her achievement.

She wanted to build something worthwhile.

Something that respected the people whose stories it told.

Something that helped viewers understand their own lives a little better.

And something that would allow the people working with her to grow as well.

She knew the next stage would demand more from her.

For the first time, she was not afraid of that possibility.She was ready to prepare.

That night, before going to bed, Vaasanthi sat by the window with her notebook.

She thought about the day she had first stood before a camera, nervous but determined to deliver her report.

She thought about the interviews that had changed her understanding of people.

She thought about the first conversation with her father, the long silence that followed, and the day her mother finally agreed to speak to him.

She thought about the ordinary evenings that had followed: tea in the kitchen, photographs spread across the table, and conversations that were becoming easier with each passing week.

She thought about Nisha, whose friendship had nearly faded without either of them choosing to end it.

And she thought about Vikram, whose disagreement had initially felt like a challenge to her authority but had become an opportunity to learn how to lead.

Each experience had taught her something different. Yet the same principle seemed to connect them.

Relationships did not become stronger simply because people believed they mattered.

They became stronger when people acted as though they mattered.

When they made time.

When they listened.

When they spoke honestly.

When they acknowledged their mistakes.

When they took responsibility for their part without assuming responsibility for everything.

And when they understood that a meaningful relationship was not preserved by one perfect gesture, but by the willingness to keep making thoughtful choices.

Vaasanthi opened to a fresh page and wrote:

I used to think that the first step was important because it could bring someone back.

Now I understand that it is important for another reason too.

It reveals the person I choose to become.

When I apologise, I choose honesty over pride.

When I listen, I choose understanding over assumption.

When I call a friend, I choose connection over hesitation.

When I speak up for what is right, I choose responsibility over convenience.

And when I accept that another person may not respond as I hope, I choose peace over the endless burden of wondering what might have happened if I had tried.

She stopped writing. The room was quiet.

For years, she had measured her life by the things she had not received: the years without her father, the affection she had missed, the conversations that had never happened.

Those losses were real. She would never pretend otherwise.

But she was beginning to measure her life by something else as well.

The choices still available to her.

She could not recover every missed opportunity. She could not rewrite every misunderstanding.

She could not ensure that every relationship would survive.

But she could decide how she would respond to the people who entered her life from this moment onward.

She could make an effort. She could be honest.

She could be brave enough to begin a difficult conversation.

And she could continue moving forward without demanding that the past become different before she allowed herself to be happy.

She closed the notebook and switched off the light. Tomorrow, she would begin preparing the proposal.

There would be new responsibilities, new decisions, and new lessons waiting for her.

She did not know precisely where the journey would lead. But she no longer needed every step to be certain before taking it.

She had learned that sometimes the way forward becomes visible only after we begin walking.

And she was ready for the next step.

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Chapter 18:

The proposal lay on Vaasanthi's desk for three days before she found the courage to open it again.

It was not that she did not know what she wanted to write. In fact, her mind had been overflowing with ideas ever since Mr. Menon had asked her to prepare a year-long plan for expanding the interview series. She could already imagine the kind of programme she wanted to create, the people she wanted to bring before the camera, the stories she wanted to tell, and the conversations she wanted viewers to remember long after the television screen went dark.

But the moment she looked at the blank pages, the excitement inside her gave way to a familiar question.

Am I really ready for this?

Until recently, she had been the reporter who went wherever she was sent. She covered traffic congestion, interviewed local residents about civic problems, reported on weather conditions, and brought everyday. happenings to viewers. Then came the unexpected interview with Dr. Revathi, followed by conversations with people whose experiences slowly changed the way she understood life.

One assignment had led to another. One opportunity had opened the door to the next.

And now, for the first time, she was being asked not merely to participate in a programme but to imagine its future.

It was a different kind of responsibility.

A reporter could prepare for an interview, ask questions, listen carefully, and present the facts. But designing a year-long series meant thinking beyond the next episode. It required a vision, a structure, a team, a budget, and the ability to convince others that the idea deserved their time and effort.

Vaasanthi had no intention of submitting a proposal simply because her editor had asked for one.

If she was going to do it, she wanted to do it properly.

She pulled her chair closer to the desk, opened her notebook, and wrote a sentence at the top of the first page.

Every conversation should leave someone with something worth thinking about.

She read it twice.

Then she began.

She wanted the series to move beyond conventional interviews, where a guest spoke about achievements and

the interviewer asked predictable questions. Success mattered, but she wanted to explore the human journey behind it. What had the person feared? Which decision had changed the course of their life? Who had supported them when nobody else believed in them? Which mistake had taught them the most? Which relationship had they nearly lost? What had they learned too late?

She wanted the audience to meet not merely the accomplished individual sitting in the studio, but the person who had existed before the applause.

A successful entrepreneur could speak about a business failure.

A renowned doctor could discuss a decision that had changed the way she treated patients.

An artist could talk about the years when nobody wanted to listen.

A teacher could describe the child who had nearly abandoned education.

A sportsperson could remember the person who had first told them they were not good enough.

And an ordinary person, without a famous name or an impressive designation, could share an experience that might change somebody else's life.

The series would not be a collection of success stories.

It would be a collection of human stories.

She began outlining the episodes, grouping them into themes: beginnings, setbacks, choices, courage, responsibility, relationships, and second chances. She wanted the programme to be accessible to younger viewers without losing its depth for older audiences.

She also wanted a section in which viewers could write to the channel and share the questions they had been afraid to ask someone in their own lives.

As she wrote, she became so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not notice the time passing.

It was Ravi who finally interrupted her.

“Vaasanthi!”

She looked up.

“Are you still here?”

She glanced at the clock. It was nearly eight in the evening.

“I didn't realise it was so late.”

Ravi looked at the pages scattered across her desk.

“Either you're writing a proposal or planning to start your own television channel.”

She smiled. “At the moment, I'm trying to convince myself that I can do the first one.”

Ravi pulled a chair closer and looked at the first page.

“What is it about?”

She explained the concept, her proposed themes, and the kind of stories she wanted to bring to viewers.

He listened without interrupting.

When she finished, he leaned back.

“You know what I like about this?”

“What?”

“You're not thinking only about who will agree to come on the programme. You're thinking about what people might take away after watching it.”

“Isn't that the point?”

“It should be. But not everybody thinks that way.”

Vaasanthi looked at him.

Ravi continued, “Still, don't forget that a good idea needs a good team. You can have the most beautiful concept in the world, but if the people working on it don't understand it, you'll spend all your time fighting to protect it.”

His words stayed with her after he left.

She had been thinking about the programme itself. She had not yet thought enough about the people who would have to bring it to life.

For the first time, she wondered whether preparing the proposal was the easiest part of the assignment.

The following Monday, Vaasanthi submitted her proposal to Mr. Menon.

He read it carefully, occasionally making a note in the margin. She sat across from him, trying not to interpret every pause as a sign of disapproval.

When he reached the final page, he closed the document and looked at her.

“This is ambitious.”

“I know, sir.”

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“More ambitious than the work we are currently doing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And it will require more time, more people, and more money.”

“I have tried to account for that.”

“I can see that. But there are two things I want you to understand before we go any further.”

Vaasanthi straightened in her chair.

“First, an ambitious proposal is not the same as an achievable plan. We must know what we can realistically deliver. Second, if management approves this, you will have to work with people who may not share your enthusiasm.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

His question was not unkind, but it made her pause.

Mr. Menon continued.

“Some will think the idea is too idealistic. Some will worry about ratings. Some will question whether viewers want thoughtful conversations when there is so much competition for their attention. Others may have better ideas than yours. You must be prepared to listen to all of them.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

“I don't expect everyone to agree with me, sir.”

“Good. And when they disagree, don't immediately assume they haven't understood your vision. Sometimes they understand it perfectly well but see a problem you haven't noticed.”

She remembered her recent disagreement with Vikram.

“I'll keep that in mind.”

Mr. Menon placed the proposal in a folder.

“I am forwarding this to the programming head. If it receives approval, we'll begin with a pilot phase. You will coordinate the editorial planning, but you won't be working alone. We'll put together a team.”

He paused.

“And Vaasanthi?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Your job will not be to make everyone think the way you do. It will be to help a group of people work towards a common objective.”

She left his office thinking about that sentence.

For most of her life, she had found it easier to depend on herself. When she had been hurt, she had withdrawn. When she had doubted people, she had learned to stand alone. Even after discovering the value of relationships, she still sometimes treated independence as the safest option.

Now she was being asked to build something that could not succeed through independence alone.

She would have to depend on people.And she would have to let them depend on her.

The approval arrived eleven days later.

It was not an unconditional approval for the entire year-long programme. Management wanted a three-episode pilot, followed by an assessment of audience response, production requirements, and costs. If the pilot succeeded, the series would be expanded in phases.

Vaasanthi was delighted.Then she received the team list.

Her excitement became more complicated.

Pradeep would handle production coordination. Vikram would oversee aspects of programme scheduling and editing. Two researchers would support background preparation. A junior producer named Shalini would coordinate guest communication. The technical team would manage recording and post-production.

And Sharat, a colleague from the programming department, would work with her on episode planning and the programme's overall presentation.

She knew Sharat by sight. They had attended a few editorial meetings together, exchanged occasional professional messages, and once worked on a special broadcast during a major public event. He was calm, articulate, and known for asking practical questions without making others feel foolish for not having considered them.

They had never spoken at length.

At the first planning meeting, he arrived with a notebook, a laptop, and a printed copy of her proposal.

“I've read this twice,” he said as he took his seat.

Vaasanthi smiled. “I hope the second reading was better than the first.”

“The second reading gave me more questions.”

“That sounds less encouraging.”

“Questions are not necessarily criticism.”

She recognised the familiar distinction in his words.

“Fair enough,” she said. “Let's hear them.”

The meeting began well. Vaasanthi presented the central idea of the series, explaining why she wanted the interviews to explore the personal experiences behind public achievements.

Pradeep discussed recording schedules. Shalini suggested a system for tracking guest confirmations. The researchers proposed preparing a short background brief for every guest, including verified facts, earlier interviews, and important milestones.

Then Sharat raised his hand slightly.

“I have a concern about the structure.”

Vaasanthi turned towards him.

“Go ahead.”

“We have six themes here, and they're all good. But if we treat each theme as a separate category, the programme may become predictable. Viewers might begin to guess the questions before the interview starts.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Let the guest's journey determine the conversation. We can have an underlying theme, but we shouldn't force every person into it.”

Vaasanthi considered his point.

“That makes sense. But without a structure, we risk losing focus.”

“Agreed. We need a structure for the interviewer, not a visible cage for the guest.”

A few people smiled.

Vaasanthi wrote the sentence in her notebook.

“That's useful,” she said. “Let's work on a format that gives us direction without making every episode feel identical.”

The discussion moved forward. For the first time, she felt that the proposal was no longer just her idea. Other people were beginning to contribute to it.

And that was precisely when the real difficulties began.

The first disagreement came three days later.

The team had shortlisted a retired government schoolteacher, a young entrepreneur, and a woman who had spent more than twenty years helping children from disadvantaged families continue their education. Vaasanthi wanted the teacher to be the first guest.

Vikram disagreed.

“An unknown retired teacher is not the strongest opening for a new series,” he said during the editorial meeting. “We need someone whose name will attract viewers immediately. The entrepreneur has a good public profile. Her company has been covered in business publications, and she has a compelling success story.”

“The teacher has a compelling story too,” Vaasanthi replied.

“I'm not saying otherwise. I'm saying we need to introduce the programme to the audience in a way that gives it a chance to survive.”

“We shouldn't suggest that a person needs to be famous before their experiences deserve attention.”

Vikram sighed.

“That's not what I'm suggesting. But we are a television channel, Vaasanthi. We have to attract viewers before we can offer them anything.”

The room fell quiet.

Vaasanthi knew that he had a point. She also knew that the series could lose its identity if it began by following the same choices as every other programme.

Yet she could feel herself becoming defensive.

She was about to repeat her argument when she remembered Mr. Menon's warning: people might understand the vision and still see a problem she had missed.

She stopped.

“Tell me something, Vikram. If we begin with the entrepreneur, what do you think the first episode should achieve?”

He looked slightly surprised by the question.

“Establish the format. Show viewers that this is a serious interview, not a promotional conversation. And give them a reason to watch the next episode.”

“Would the teacher do that?”

“If we produce it well, possibly. But the entrepreneur has a stronger recognition factor.”

Vaasanthi looked at the shortlist.

“What if we do both things? We open with the entrepreneur, but we build the conversation around the decisions and relationships that shaped her journey, rather than presenting it as a business success story. Then we schedule the teacher as the second guest, with a strong promotional introduction that tells viewers why

his experience matters.”

Vikram thought about it.

“That could work.”

“And we should make sure the first episode establishes that this series isn't only about famous people. We can do that in the opening narration and in how we introduce the second episode.”

Sharat leaned forward.

“We could also create a short preview featuring all three guests. Let the audience see that the series will include different kinds of lives and different kinds of achievement.”

Pradeep nodded.

“That gives us more flexibility in promotion.”

The discussion continued for another twenty minutes. By the end, the team had a workable plan.

The entrepreneur would open the series, the teacher would follow, and the social worker would feature in the third pilot episode.

Vaasanthi left the meeting relieved, but not entirely satisfied with herself.

She had reached a reasonable decision. Yet she had noticed how quickly her first instinct had been to defend her original choice.

She had nearly treated a difference of opinion as a threat to the programme.

That evening, she wrote in her notebook:

If I want people to take the first step towards one another, I must also be willing to take a step towards the people who disagree with me. Listening does not mean surrendering my judgment. It means giving my judgment the benefit of another person's experience.

She underlined the last sentence.

It was a lesson she would need again.

The days leading up to the first recording were exhausting.

The entrepreneur's assistant initially agreed to the proposed date, then requested a change. The studio was unavailable on the new date. The research team discovered an inconsistency in one of the figures included in the preliminary background note. The promotional team wanted a dramatic opening line that Vaasanthi felt exaggerated the guest's achievements.

Every problem seemed small on its own.

Together, they threatened to consume the entire schedule.

Shalini, who was handling guest communication, was especially troubled. She had been working late every evening and had begun making mistakes in the tracking sheet.

One afternoon, Vaasanthi found her sitting alone in the conference room, staring at her computer.

“Everything all right?” Vaasanthi asked.

Shalini looked up.

“Yes, ma'am.”

Vaasanthi pulled a chair closer.

“You don't look all right.”

Shalini hesitated before speaking.

“I think I'm falling behind. Every time I confirm something, the schedule changes. Then I have to contact everyone again. I know this is my responsibility, but I'm worried I'll miss something important.”

Vaasanthi understood the anxiety in her voice.

She remembered her own first interview with Dr. Revathi. She had prepared until she could barely see the difference between preparation and fear. At the time, what she had needed was not somebody to tell her that the work was easy. She had needed somebody to help her believe that she could handle it.

“Show me the tracking sheet,” she said.

Shalini opened it.

Together, they went through the pending confirmations, the changes in recording dates, and the tasks that had not yet been assigned. Vaasanthi discovered that several people had been sending schedule updates through different channels. Shalini had been trying to keep track of all of them manually.

“This isn't only your problem,” Vaasanthi said. “Our process is making the work harder than it needs to be.”

“But I should have managed it better.”

“Perhaps. And we can discuss that. But we should also fix the process.”

They created a shared schedule with one designated place for updates. Any change affecting recording dates would be entered there, and the person making the change would be responsible for updating the relevant details.

Then Vaasanthi took some of the outstanding calls herself.

Shalini watched her for a moment.

“You don't have to do that, ma'am.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you?”

“Because the recording needs to happen, and we're a team.”

Shalini lowered her eyes to the screen, but Vaasanthi noticed the relief on her face.

Before leaving, Vaasanthi said, “Next time, tell me earlier when the workload becomes unmanageable. Asking for help isn't an admission that you can't do the job. It gives us a chance to solve the problem before it becomes bigger.”

As she walked back to her desk, she realised how much the conversation resembled the lessons she had learned from the people she interviewed.

The retired teacher had spoken about listening to children before judging them. Dr. Saroja had explained that understanding another person required more than hearing their words. Arunachalam Narayanan had learned that the people who helped him achieve his purpose were part of that purpose itself.

Vaasanthi had admired those lessons when she heard them.

Now she had to practise them when she was tired, under pressure, and responsible for the outcome.

That was a different kind of learning. It was also the kind that mattered.

The first recording went well.

The entrepreneur, Nandita Rao, spoke candidly about the early years of her business, the loan she had struggled to repay, and the time she had nearly accepted a secure job because she feared her venture would fail. Vaasanthi guided the conversation away from predictable questions about growth and profit towards the people who had influenced Nandita's decisions.

At one point, she asked, “Was there a moment when someone else's belief in you became more important than your own belief in yourself?”

Nandita was silent for several seconds.

“My younger brother,” she finally said. “He was still studying when I started the business. I had already decided I was going to shut it down. I remember sitting at the dining table with the accounts in front of me, trying to work out how to tell my family that I had failed.”

She smiled faintly.

“My brother came in, looked at the papers, and asked me why I was calculating the cost of closing the business when I hadn't yet calculated the cost of trying for another six months.”

The studio crew laughed softly.

“But he was serious,” Nandita continued. “He told me that if I wanted to stop, I could stop. But he didn't want me to make the decision only because I was frightened of being judged.”

Vaasanthi listened carefully.

“What did you do?”

“I tried for another six months. And then another six months after that.”

Nandita's voice grew quieter.

“My brother never invested a rupee in my business. He didn't have the money. But he gave me something that mattered just as much at that time. He made me feel that I was allowed to try again.”

When the recording ended, the team gathered to review the footage.

There were technical adjustments to make, and the opening needed to be tightened. But the interview had the warmth and depth Vaasanthi had hoped for.

Vikram looked at her.

“That worked.”

She smiled. “I'm glad.”

“No, I mean the format worked. You let her tell the story without losing the direction of the conversation.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded towards the monitor.

“And the brother's answer is the strongest part. We should preserve the pause before she responds. Don't cut it just to make the episode faster.”

Vaasanthi smiled again.

“I agree.”

It was a small exchange, but it meant something to her. She and Vikram had not become identical in their thinking. They still had different instincts about pace, structure, and presentation. Yet they were learning how to use those differences instead of allowing them to divide the work.

Perhaps that was what a functioning relationship looked like.

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Not the absence of disagreement, but the presence of enough respect to continue the conversation.

The episode aired on Friday evening.

Vaasanthi watched it from home with Radha and Kishan.

Her father had arrived early, carrying a packet of sweets that he claimed he had bought because the shop was on the way. Radha had pointed out that the shop was in the opposite direction. Kishan had replied that good sweets deserved a small detour.

They had both laughed.

Vaasanthi had watched the exchange from the kitchen doorway, feeling a quiet happiness that still surprised her.

There had been a time when she could not imagine these two people sharing an ordinary evening without tension. Now they could disagree about the smallest things and move on without turning them into evidence of a larger failure.

She wondered whether they had always possessed this ability and simply lost it somewhere along the way, or whether they were learning it for the first time.

Perhaps the answer was both.

When the programme began, Kishan moved to the edge of the sofa.

“Your name is coming on the screen,” he said.

“Dad, it's only the opening credit.”

“Still.”

Radha smiled at him.

“Let her watch the programme. You are behaving as though she is receiving an award.”

“Why can't I be happy before the award?” he replied.

Vaasanthi laughed.

On the screen, Nandita was speaking about the early days of her business. The conversation moved naturally from professional decisions to personal fears, from the support she had received to the mistakes she had made.

When the episode reached the exchange about her brother, Kishan became quiet.

After the programme ended, he turned towards Vaasanthi.

“You asked a good question.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Do you know why I liked it?”

She shook her head.

“Because you didn't ask her what made her successful. You asked who helped her when she couldn't believe in herself.”

He paused.

“Sometimes we remember the person who reached the destination with us. We forget the person who helped us take the first step.”

Vaasanthi looked at him.

For a moment, she saw not merely the father she was getting to know, but the man who had spent years waiting for an opportunity to speak to his wife and daughter.

She had spent much of her childhood thinking that his absence was proof that he had chosen to leave her behind. She now understood that the truth had been more complicated, and that his own mistakes had played a part in the years they had lost.

Neither understanding erased the past.But it allowed her to see it more honestly.

“How are you feeling about everything now?” she asked him.

Kishan knew what she meant.

“Some days, I feel happy. Some days, I remember how much time we lost.” He looked towards Radha, who was clearing the cups from the table. “But I don't want to spend the years we have left regretting the years we cannot get back.”

He looked at his daughter again.

“I can only try to do better now.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

It was the kind of answer she had come to value: no grand promise that the past would no longer hurt, no claim that everything had been repaired, only a willingness to do better in the time that remained.

After Radha returned, the three of them sat together for a while, talking about the episode and the responses it might receive.

When Vaasanthi finally went to bed, she checked her phone.

There were messages from colleagues, a note from Mr. Menon praising the conversation, and a short message from Sharat.

Watched the episode. The conversation felt natural, especially the part about Nandita's brother. Good work, Vaasanthi. You gave the guest room to think before answering.

She read it once, then again. It was a thoughtful message. Nothing more was required of it.

She replied, *Thank you. I think the pauses often tell us as much as the answers.*

His response came a few minutes later.

Agreed. Sometimes the best part of an interview is the moment before someone decides what they are ready to say.

Vaasanthi smiled at the screen.

She liked the way he thought about the work. He seemed interested not only in the words that reached the audience but also in the process by which those words emerged.

She placed the phone on the bedside table and turned off the light.

There were many things in her life she was still learning to understand. She did not need to assign meaning to every new conversation or decide what every connection might become.

For now, it was enough to recognise a good conversation when it happened.

And to leave room for another one.

The responses to the first episode were encouraging.

The programme did not become an overnight sensation. There was no dramatic surge that transformed the channel's fortunes in a single evening. But the response was stronger than management had expected for a new format, and several viewers wrote to say that the interview had felt different from the conversations they usually watched.

One viewer said she had never thought of business failure as something that could be discussed without embarrassment.

Another wrote that she had called her younger brother after watching the programme. They had been speaking less frequently, and she had realised that she had begun to assume he no longer needed her.

A third message came from a young woman who was preparing to start a small business. She said Nandita's story had helped her understand that being frightened did not automatically mean she was making the wrong decision.

Vaasanthi read each message carefully.

She was pleased, but she was also aware of the responsibility that came with the response. Viewers were giving the programme their time and, in some cases, allowing it to influence decisions in their personal lives.

That trust could not be treated casually.

At the next team meeting, she brought a few of the responses to the table.

“These messages are encouraging,” she said. “But I don't want us to assume that every viewer will respond the same way. We should avoid making the programme sound as though every difficulty can be solved by one conversation.”

Sharat nodded.

“Especially when we're discussing relationships. Sometimes a conversation helps people understand each other. Sometimes it confirms that they need distance.”

“Exactly,” Vaasanthi said. “Taking the first step should never be presented as accepting every kind of treatment. It should mean making an honest attempt where that attempt is appropriate. We must respect the other person's choice, too.”

Vikram added, “And if we want the series to be credible, we should allow guests to speak about situations where an attempt didn't work.”

“Definitely,” Vaasanthi replied. “Otherwise, we'll be presenting a comforting idea instead of an honest one.”

They discussed how future episodes could explore difficult decisions without forcing every story into a neat ending.

The conversation made Vaasanthi realise how much the series itself was beginning to change. It had started as an idea she had wanted to protect. Now it was becoming something shaped by the combined judgment of a team.

She did not have to give up her original vision to make room for that change.

She only had to be willing to let the vision grow.

The second episode, featuring the retired teacher, brought a different kind of response.

The teacher spoke about children who arrived at school without having eaten breakfast, parents who struggled to pay for notebooks, and students who had quietly stopped attending because they believed their families needed them to work.

There was no dramatic revelation. No single event changed everything.

Instead, he described the small things that had mattered: a teacher who kept an extra meal, a headmaster who visited a family after school hours, a student who returned to class because somebody noticed his

absence.

At the end of the interview, Vaasanthi asked him, “After so many years of teaching, what do you think a child remembers most about a teacher?”

He considered the question.

“Not every lesson,” he said. “Not every examination mark. A child may forget the chapter we taught, but remember the day we made them feel they were capable of learning it.”

Vaasanthi did not speak immediately.

The teacher continued.

“We often think we are shaping a child's future by teaching them something important. Sometimes we are shaping it by refusing to let them believe that they are unimportant.”

After the recording, Vaasanthi thanked him and accompanied him towards the exit.

As they walked, he turned to her.

“May I tell you something?”

“Of course, sir.”

“You listen well. But don't become so interested in finding meaning in every person's life that you forget they are allowed to be ordinary, too.”

She looked at him, surprised.

He smiled.

“Not every life needs to produce a great lesson for somebody else. Sometimes a person simply wants to live quietly, make a few mistakes, love a few people, and do their work. That is a life worth respecting as well.”

Vaasanthi absorbed his words.

She had begun this journey believing that understanding people meant discovering the hidden explanation behind their behaviour. She now understood that people could not always be reduced to a lesson, a message, or a conclusion.

Sometimes listening meant accepting that a person had more to their life than what they were ready to share.

And sometimes the most respectful question was the one she chose not to ask.

By the end of the third pilot episode, the series had begun to establish its identity.

The social worker's interview was deeply moving, but it was not edited to make her appear heroic. She spoke about the occasions when her efforts had failed, the families who had refused assistance, and the times she

had needed to accept that she could not make decisions for other people.

The episode ended with a simple thought: helping someone did not mean deciding their life for them.

It meant offering support while respecting their agency.

Mr. Menon called Vaasanthi into his office the following morning.He had the preliminary assessment in front of him.

“The pilot has done well,” he said. “The audience response is encouraging, and the production costs are within the limits we agreed upon.”

Vaasanthi waited.

“We are going to continue the series. Management has approved the next phase, with a larger schedule and more resources.”

She felt a rush of happiness.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don't thank me yet. The next phase will be more demanding. You'll have to coordinate with more

departments, plan further ahead, and make decisions that affect other programmes. There will be days when

you cannot give every episode as much attention as you would like.”

“I understand.”

“I hope you do. Because I also want you to take more responsibility for editorial planning. You'll still be working with the team, but I expect you to guide the overall direction.”

Vaasanthi sat quietly for a moment.

This was what she had wanted. An opportunity to do work that mattered, to ask better questions, to bring more human stories to the screen.

Yet she could feel the weight of the responsibility settling on her shoulders.

“What if I make mistakes?” she asked.

Mr. Menon smiled slightly and said, “You will.”

She looked at him.

“You're not supposed to say that so confidently, sir.”

“Would you prefer me to lie?”

She laughed.

He continued, “The question is not whether you will make mistakes. It is what you do when you discover

them. Do you hide them? Blame somebody else? Defend a bad decision because you don't want to lose face?

Or do you acknowledge what happened, correct what you can, and learn from it?”

Vaasanthi thought of the years she had spent avoiding situations in which she might be hurt.

She had once believed that being strong meant preventing others from seeing her uncertainty. Now she was

beginning to understand that real responsibility sometimes required her to admit what she did not know.

“I'll try to handle it properly, sir.”

“Good. And remember, you don't have to become a different person to take on a bigger role. You have to become more fully responsible for the person you already are.”

She left the office with the approval letter in her hand.

For a few minutes, she stood near the corridor window, watching people move through the newsroom.

There was the familiar sound of telephones ringing, keyboards clicking, editors calling out instructions, and reporters rushing towards assignments. The newsroom had not changed. She had.

A few years earlier, she had entered this world hoping to prove that she could stand on her own. She had wanted a career that would not require her to depend on anyone's affection or approval.

Now she still wanted to do excellent work, still valued her independence, and still believed in the importance

of standing by her principles.

But she no longer wanted independence to become a wall between herself and other people.

She wanted to be capable enough to work alone when necessary, and wise enough to work with others when

the task required it.

She wanted to be confident without becoming rigid, compassionate without losing judgment, and firm without treating every disagreement as a battle.

She wanted to become a person whose presence made it easier for others to speak honestly.

That, she realised, was a much larger ambition than the one she had begun with.

That evening, Vaasanthi stayed late to prepare the schedule for the next phase.

Sharat was still at his desk when she walked past the programming department. He looked up.

“Congratulations.”

She stopped.

“How did you hear already?”

“Pradeep announced it to half the newsroom. I suspect the other half will know by tomorrow morning.”

She laughed.

“I haven't even had time to think about what happens next.”

“That's usually when the next thing happens.”

He closed his laptop.

“Are you pleased?”

“Very.”

“Are you worried?”

She looked at him.

“Very.”

He smiled.

“Good. That means you're taking it seriously.”

She shook her head, amused.

“Everybody seems determined to tell me that responsibility comes with worry.”

“Not worry exactly. Awareness. If you thought you already knew everything, I'd be concerned.”

For a moment, they stood in comfortable silence.

Then Sharat said, “I've watched the way you've handled the series. You care about the content, but you also care about the people doing the work. That's not as common as it should be.”

Vaasanthi was not accustomed to receiving such observations about herself.

“I still have a lot to learn.”

“Of course. So do the rest of us.”

He picked up his bag.

“Don't make the mistake of thinking that because you're leading the project, you have to carry every problem yourself. A good team should make the work more manageable, not give you more people to worry about.”

She remembered the conversation with Shalini.

“I think I'm beginning to understand that.”

“Good. Then we're both learning something.”

He wished her goodnight and left.

Vaasanthi returned to her desk, but his words stayed with her.

She did not know whether Sharat had said them simply as a colleague or whether there was a deeper kindness behind them. She did not feel the need to decide.

For a long time, she had treated uncertainty as something that had to be eliminated before she could move forward. She was learning that not every question needed an immediate answer.

Some things could be allowed to develop at their own pace.

Some relationships could begin with nothing more than respect, shared work, and the willingness to understand another person.

And sometimes, taking the first step did not mean rushing towards a destination.

It meant remaining open to the possibility that a new path existed.

At home, Radha was arranging a few books on the living-room shelf when Vaasanthi entered.

“How was your day?” her mother asked.

“Good. The pilot has been approved for expansion.”

Radha turned around.

“That's wonderful!”

Kishan, who had been reading the newspaper, lowered it immediately.

“What does that mean?”

Vaasanthi explained the next phase of the series, the additional responsibilities, and the opportunity to guide the editorial planning.

Kishan listened with unmistakable pride.

“You have come a long way.”

She smiled.

“I still have a long way to go.”

“Both can be true,” Radha said.

They sat down for dinner, and the conversation moved from the programme to ordinary household matters.

Kishan complained that the newspaper had arrived late. Radha reminded him that he had spent twenty minutes discussing the newspaper with the neighbour instead of collecting it. He argued that the neighbour had asked him a question. She replied that he could have answered it after bringing the paper home.

Vaasanthi watched them with a smile.

Once, such an exchange might have unsettled her. She might have wondered whether an argument was beginning, whether one of them would become silent, or whether the evening would end with an unresolved hurt.

Now she could see the difference between disagreement and distance.

Her parents were not trying to prove that they would never hurt each other again. They were learning to speak, listen, disagree, and return to one another without allowing every small irritation to become a reason for withdrawal.

After dinner, Kishan asked her to show him the revised programme schedule.

He studied it carefully, asking a few questions about the number of episodes and the recording arrangements.

“Will you have enough time to prepare for every interview?” he asked.

“I hope so. But I may have to learn to share the work more effectively.”

“That's sensible.”

He handed the schedule back.

“Just don't think that because you're responsible for the programme, every problem is yours alone to solve.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“Dad, you sound exactly like my editor.”

“Then your editor must be a sensible man.”

Radha laughed from the other side of the room.

For a moment, the three of them were simply a family enjoying an ordinary evening.

No great apology was being made. No painful history was being discussed. Nobody was taking a dramatic step towards reconciliation.

And yet, in the ordinary ease of that moment, Vaasanthi could see the value of all the steps that had come before it.

Her father had reached out again. She had chosen to meet him.

She had spoken to her mother. Her mother had eventually agreed to listen.

Kishan had apologised. Radha had allowed him another chance. All three had continued showing up, even when the conversations were awkward or the memories painful.

The first step had not restored their lost years. It had made these evenings possible.

Vaasanthi went to her room later that night and opened her notebook.

She wrote:

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At first, I thought taking the first step meant finding the courage to speak when the other person remained silent.

Now I understand that the first step can take many forms. It can mean asking a difficult question, admitting a mistake, listening to a different opinion, asking for help, or allowing another person to contribute to something we care about.

It can mean standing by what we believe while remaining willing to understand why someone else believes differently.

It can mean offering someone an opportunity without demanding that they accept it.

She paused before writing the final lines.

We are responsible for making an honest effort towards the bonds we value. We are not responsible for controlling another person's response.

If the other person meets us halfway, we can begin rebuilding together. If they choose not to, we may have to accept that reality and move forward without carrying the regret of never having tried.

Taking the first step is not a promise that everything will work out.

It is a promise to ourselves that fear, pride, hesitation, or the comfort of waiting will not always make our decisions for us.

She closed the notebook.

Outside, the city was settling into the night. Somewhere, a television was playing. Somewhere, a person was considering whether to make a phone call. Somewhere, two friends were waiting for the other to send a message. Somewhere, a daughter was wondering whether her father remembered her. Somewhere, a colleague was holding back an apology because the words seemed too difficult to say.

Vaasanthi could not reach every one of them.

She could not know which conversations would succeed, which relationships would heal, or which attempts would remain unanswered.

But she could continue doing the work she had chosen.

She could ask questions that helped people understand themselves.

She could create space for voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

She could lead without assuming that leadership meant having every answer.

And she could remember that the people around her were not obstacles to her purpose. They were part of the world in which that purpose had meaning.

Tomorrow, she would return to the newsroom with a larger schedule, a more demanding role, and a team

whose strengths and disagreements would continue to test her.

She would make mistakes. She would have difficult conversations. She would sometimes be impatient, sometimes uncertain, and sometimes tempted to do everything herself.

But she would keep learning.

She had spent the early years of her life believing that the safest way to avoid disappointment was to expect nothing from anyone.

She now knew that a life built entirely around that belief might protect a person from certain hurts, but it could also prevent them from experiencing the relationships, opportunities, and shared achievements that made life richer.

She did not intend to abandon her judgment or become careless with her trust.

She simply no longer wanted fear to decide the boundaries of her life.

Vaasanthi turned off the light and lay down. The next chapter of her career had begun.

And, without fully realising it yet, so had another chapter of her heart.

Sometimes, the first step brings us back to someone we thought we had lost. Sometimes, it takes us towards a future we had never imagined. And sometimes, it teaches us that the courage to begin again is not a single act of bravery, but a habit we must practise every day.

Chapter 19:

The call came on a Tuesday morning, just as Vaasanthi was preparing for an interview.

“Vaasanthi, Mr. Menon wants to see you immediately,” Pradeep said over the phone.

“Is everything all right?”

“He didn't say. He just asked me to send you to his office.”

Vaasanthi glanced at the interview notes spread across her desk. Her guest was expected in less than an hour, and she had spent the previous evening preparing questions.

“Can you tell him I'll be there in fifteen minutes?”

“I already told him you were preparing for the interview. He said to come as soon as you can.”

There was something unusual about the request. Mr. Menon rarely interrupted a scheduled assignment unless the matter was important.

Vaasanthi gathered her notes, informed Shalini that she would be back shortly, and walked towards his cabin.

Mr. Menon was seated with two other people: the channel's programming director, Mr. Suresh, and a senior executive from the management team.

“Come in, Vaasanthi,” Mr. Menon said.

She greeted them and took a seat.

“We have been reviewing the performance of the interview series,” Mr. Suresh began. “The response has been encouraging. More importantly, the programme is developing a distinct identity. We would like to expand it further.”

Vaasanthi waited, listening carefully.

“The channel is planning a broader editorial initiative that will include interviews, field reports, and special programmes built around people's experiences. We want someone who understands the editorial purpose and can coordinate across departments.”

Mr. Menon continued, “We have recommended you to take responsibility for leading this initiative.”

For a moment, Vaasanthi was unable to respond.

“Me, sir?”

Mr. Suresh smiled.

“Yes, you. We have seen your work, and we have seen how you have handled the team. You understand the content, and you have shown that you can take responsibility when things become difficult.”

Vaasanthi felt pleased, but the happiness was accompanied by uncertainty.

“Sir, I am grateful for the opportunity. But I have never handled a project of this size.”

“That is true,” Mr. Menon replied. “You will have support, and you will be expected to learn. We are not asking you to know everything on the first day.”

Mr. Suresh added, “We will begin with a trial period. You will lead the editorial initiative, coordinate with the programming team, and report directly to Mr. Menon. Your performance will be reviewed after four months.”

Four months.

The period was short enough to make the responsibility feel immediate and long enough to give her a real opportunity to prove herself.

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“I will do my best, sir.”

“We expect that,” Mr. Menon said. “But remember, doing your best does not mean doing everything yourself.”

Vaasanthi smiled. She seemed to be hearing that advice everywhere lately.

As she left the office, the thought that had occupied her for years returned in a different form.

She had once wondered whether she was capable of becoming a journalist.

Now she was being asked to lead other journalists.

Life had not given her a single dramatic moment that transformed everything. It had given her one assignment, one conversation, one opportunity at a time. She had tried to meet each one honestly, and somehow those small steps had brought her here.

She returned to her desk, completed her interview preparation, and welcomed her guest.

But throughout the morning, the news of her new responsibility remained in the back of her mind.

A new door had opened. This time, she intended to walk through it.

The next four months were among the busiest of Vaasanthi's professional life.

Her responsibilities expanded quickly. She had to review story proposals, approve interview themes, coordinate recording schedules, resolve editorial disagreements, and ensure that the series maintained its quality while meeting the channel's commercial expectations.

There were days when she reached the office before most of her colleagues and left after the newsroom had begun to empty.

There were also days when a carefully prepared programme had to be changed at the last minute because a guest cancelled, a new development demanded attention, or an important fact required further verification.

She learned to delegate.

She learned to ask questions before giving instructions.

She learned that a person who appeared difficult in a meeting might simply be worried about a deadline, and that a colleague who disagreed with her might be protecting an aspect of the work she had overlooked.

Most importantly, she learned to distinguish between a problem that required her decision and a problem that required her to help someone else make a decision.

The series grew steadily.

One episode explored the journey of a doctor who had established a small clinic in a remote village. Another featured a former government officer who had spent years helping people access public services. A third followed a young musician who had continued practising despite repeated rejections.

Vaasanthi ensured that the guests were not presented as perfect people who had always made the right choices. Their failures, doubts, and difficult decisions remained part of their stories.

The audience began to recognise the programme.

Letters and messages arrived from viewers who had seen something of their own lives in the conversations. Some wrote about relationships they wanted to repair. Others spoke about careers they had abandoned too early, dreams they had been afraid to pursue, or people whose contributions they had never properly acknowledged.

Vaasanthi read as many messages as her schedule permitted.

She knew she could not solve the problems of everyone who wrote to the channel. But she could ensure that the programme treated their experiences with respect.

That was enough to keep her motivated.

One afternoon, after a particularly demanding editorial meeting, Vikram approached her desk.

“I owe you a compliment.”

Vaasanthi looked up in surprise.

“That sounds serious.”

“Don't become too happy. I may not repeat it.”

She laughed.

Vikram pulled a chair closer.

“When this project began, I thought you were so focused on the emotional side of the stories that you might struggle with the practical demands. I was wrong.”

Vaasanthi listened without interrupting.

“You've become more balanced. You still care about the human side, but you understand the deadlines, the budgets, the audience, and the responsibilities of the channel. And when you disagree with someone now, you actually listen before responding.”

“Are you saying I didn't listen before?”

“I'm saying you have improved.”

She smiled.

“Thank you, Vikram. I appreciate that.”

He stood up.

“And for what it's worth, I think the programme is becoming something worth being proud of.”

After he left, Vaasanthi sat quietly for a moment.

Praise from her editor was encouraging. Recognition from colleagues mattered too. But what pleased her most was the knowledge that she was changing without abandoning the qualities that had brought her this far.

She had not become less compassionate in order to become more capable.

She had learned to combine compassion with judgment, and conviction with openness.

The distinction mattered to her.

Sharat became an important part of this new phase of her life.

They worked together frequently, sometimes spending long hours reviewing proposals or discussing how a programme should be presented. Their conversations were mostly professional, but they gradually became more comfortable with each other.

He was one of the few colleagues who could disagree with Vaasanthi without making her feel that she had to defend herself.

She appreciated that.

One evening, they were reviewing a proposal for a special programme when Sharat noticed that she had read the same paragraph several times.

“Are you tired?”

“A little.”

“A little?”

She looked at him.

“All right. Very tired.”

“Then why don't we finish this tomorrow?”

“Because the review is due tomorrow morning.”

“And if we continue now, we may spend an hour discussing the same paragraph.”

She glanced at the clock and reluctantly closed the file.

“You may be right.”

“I'll make a note of this historic moment.”

She laughed.

They left the office together. Outside, the evening traffic moved slowly, and the sky was turning orange behind the buildings.

“Have you always wanted to work in television?” Sharat asked.

“I always wanted to become a journalist. Television was one way of doing it.”

“What attracted you to journalism?”

Vaasanthi considered the question.

“I wanted to understand people. I thought if I could ask the right questions, I would understand why they did what they did.”

“And do you?”

“Sometimes. Other times, I discover that people themselves don't fully understand why they did something.”

Sharat smiled.

“That sounds more realistic than most answers I've heard.”

She looked at him.

“What about you? Why did you choose programming?”

“I like taking an idea and finding a way to communicate it. A good idea can be lost if it isn't presented properly.

And sometimes an ordinary idea becomes meaningful because someone finds the right way to present it.”

“That's true.”

They reached the place where they needed to go in different directions.

“Goodnight, Vaasanthi,” he said.

“Goodnight, Sharat.”

She continued towards the parking area, thinking about their conversation.

There had been no dramatic moment, no sudden revelation. Just an easy exchange between two people who enjoyed talking to each other.

Yet she realised that she had begun to look forward to those conversations.

For someone who had spent years believing that emotional distance was the safest way to live, even that small realisation felt significant.

She did not try to suppress it. She simply allowed herself to acknowledge it.

The final review meeting took place at the end of the fourth month.

Vaasanthi entered the conference room carrying a detailed report on the editorial initiative. It included programme performance, audience responses, production costs, upcoming plans, and recommendations for the next phase.

Mr. Menon, Mr. Suresh, and the senior management team were already seated.

The meeting lasted nearly an hour.

They discussed the growth of the series, the quality of the interviews, the workload of the team, and the possibility of expanding the initiative into a permanent editorial division.

There were questions about cost management and the number of programmes the team could realistically produce. Vaasanthi answered what she could and acknowledged the areas where further planning was required.

At the end, Mr. Suresh closed the report.

“We are satisfied with the progress. You have demonstrated that you can manage the editorial direction and work effectively across departments.”

Vaasanthi thanked him.

Mr. Menon then placed a document in front of her.

“Management has decided to appoint you as the Chief Executive Officer of the editorial division, with responsibility for the expanded initiative and its associated operations.”

She looked at the document, then at him.

“CEO, sir?”

“Yes, Vaasanthi.”

For a moment, she could not find the words.

She had spent years trying to establish herself as a journalist. She had struggled with uncertainty, faced criticism, and wondered whether her choice of career would ever lead to the life she wanted.

Now she was being entrusted with a leadership role that she could scarcely have imagined when she first stood in front of a camera to report on traffic congestion.

“Thank you, sir,” she finally said. “I will work hard to justify your confidence.”

Mr. Menon smiled.

“You have already demonstrated your ability. Now your responsibility is to continue growing and to help others grow with you.”

After the meeting, she stepped into the corridor and called her mother.

Radha answered immediately.

“What happened? Is everything all right?”

“Amma, I have some news.”

“What news?”

“I've been appointed as CEO.”

There was a moment of silence.

Then Radha said, “What did you say?”

Vaasanthi repeated it, laughing now because she could hear the excitement rising in her mother's voice.

“Oh, my God! Vaasanthi!”

Radha's voice trembled with happiness.

“I am so proud of you, ma.”

Vaasanthi closed her eyes.

“Thank you, Amma.”

“Wait. I'll tell your father.”

She heard Radha call out to Kishan.

“Come here! Our daughter has something to tell you!”

A few seconds later, Kishan came on the line.

“Vaasanthi?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Your mother says you have become CEO.”

“I have.”

He was silent for a moment.

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Then he said, “I wish I could have been there when you first started your career. I wish I could have seen all those days when you were trying to find your place.”

His words touched her deeply.

“But I am here now,” he continued. “And I am proud of you. Very proud.”

Vaasanthi felt tears gathering in her eyes.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

She did not need to tell him that those words meant more to her than he could imagine.

He did not need to know how many years she had spent wondering whether she mattered to him.

They had both lost time. But they were no longer allowing the past to decide what they could say to each other in the present.

That evening, her parents came to her home with sweets. Radha hugged her tightly, while Kishan insisted on taking a photograph with his daughter.

“Stand properly,” he said, adjusting his position.

“Dad, we're only taking a photograph.”

“Exactly. It should be a good one.”

Radha laughed.

Vaasanthi stood between them.

When Kishan placed his arm around her shoulder, she leaned towards him naturally.

The camera captured three smiling faces.

But the photograph held something more than professional success or parental pride.

It held the quiet happiness of a family that had finally stopped postponing its affection.

A few days later, Sharat asked Vaasanthi whether she would join him for coffee after work.

“I have something I would like to discuss with you,” he said.

“Is it about the next programme?”

“Not exactly.”

She looked at him curiously.

“All right. Give me half an hour to finish these notes.”

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They met at a quiet café near the office.

For the first few minutes, they discussed work, the next phase of the editorial division, and the challenges that

came with her new position. Sharat congratulated her again, and she thanked him.

Then he became quieter.

“Vaasanthi, can I ask you something personal?”

“Of course.”

“Are you seeing anyone?”

She was surprised by the question, but she answered honestly and said, “No.”

He nodded, appearing to gather his thoughts.

“I hope this doesn't make you uncomfortable. I've wanted to ask you something for a while, but I wasn't sure whether I should.”

Vaasanthi waited.

“I admire the way you approach your work. You care about what you do, but you don't treat people as though their opinions don't matter. You can be firm without being dismissive, and you are willing to reconsider your decisions when someone makes a good point.”

She listened, unsure where the conversation was leading.

“And I enjoy talking to you,” he continued. “Not just about work. I find myself wanting to know more about the person you are outside this office.”

Vaasanthi looked down at her coffee for a moment.

Sharat continued carefully.

“I would like to get to know you better, if you are comfortable with that. Not as a colleague discussing another programme. I mean personally. And if, after some time, we both feel that there is something meaningful between us, I would be interested in exploring the possibility of marriage.”

The words settled between them.

Vaasanthi had imagined marriage in the abstract, as something that might eventually become part of her life. But she had never given much thought to what it would feel like when someone actually expressed an interest in sharing that life with her.

Her first instinct was to retreat into careful analysis.

Was she ready? Did she know enough about him? Could a relationship remain steady when two people had different expectations? What if affection created vulnerabilities she had spent years learning to manage?

She recognised the familiar voice of fear.

For most of her life, she had allowed uncertainty to become a reason for keeping the door closed.

But she had also learned that taking the first step did not mean making a lifelong promise without understanding what lay ahead.

It meant being honest about what she wanted, asking the questions that mattered, and allowing another person the opportunity to answer.

“Sharat,” she said, “I appreciate your honesty. I like talking to you, too. But I don't want to rush into a decision simply because the possibility has been raised.”

“I wouldn't want that either.”

“I would like to get to know you better. We should talk openly about our expectations, our families, and the kind of life we want. And we should be able to disagree without assuming that disagreement means something is wrong.”

Sharat smiled.

“That sounds reasonable.”

“And I don't want either of us to pretend to be someone we aren't just to make the other person happy.”

“I agree.”

She paused.

“So, yes. I'm willing to explore this seriously. But let's take our time and be honest with each other.”

“That's all I was hoping for.”

As they finished their coffee, Vaasanthi felt something unexpected: not the certainty that everything would work out, but the comfort of knowing that she had not allowed fear to answer the question for her.

She had taken a step towards a possibility. The next steps would depend on both of them.

And she was ready to discover what they might be.

That night, Vaasanthi told her parents about Sharat.

Radha listened carefully, asking about his family, his work, and how long they had known each other. Kishan asked a few questions of his own, but neither parent rushed to make a decision on her behalf.

When Vaasanthi finished explaining the conversation, Radha held her hand.

“What do you feel about him?”

“I like him, Amma. I respect him. But I want to understand him better before deciding.”

“Then do that,” Radha said. “There is no need to hurry.”

Kishan nodded.

“Marriage is not only about finding someone you like. It is about finding someone with whom you can speak honestly, especially when life becomes difficult.”

Vaasanthi looked at him.

He smiled gently.

“And remember, a good relationship doesn't mean you will never disagree. It means you should be able to talk about the disagreement without making the other person your enemy.”

She thought of the years her parents had lost because neither had been able to move beyond hurt and pride soon enough.

“Dad, do you think people can really change?”

Kishan considered the question.

“Yes. But not because somebody keeps telling them they should. They change when they recognise what their actions are doing, accept responsibility, and choose to behave differently.”

Radha looked at him, then at Vaasanthi.

“And sometimes,” she added, “they need somebody to give them an opportunity to show that they have changed.”

The three of them sat quietly for a moment.

Vaasanthi felt grateful that her parents were not trying to make her decision for her. They were offering their experience without demanding that she follow it blindly.

She realised that this, too, was a form of love. Not controlling another person's future.

Not insisting that they make the choices you would make.

But helping them think clearly, and trusting them to take responsibility for their own lives.

Later, in her notebook, she wrote just one sentence:

I once believed that the safest life was one in which I needed nobody. Now I understand that a meaningful life is one in which I can stand on my own feet and still choose to walk beside someone.

She closed the notebook.

Her professional life had reached a milestone she had once only dreamed of. Her relationship with her parents had found a new beginning. And a new possibility was opening in her personal life.

There were still questions to answer, decisions to make, and uncertainties she could not predict.

But she no longer needed every uncertainty to disappear before she moved forward.

She had learned that courage did not always arrive as a grand feeling of confidence.

Sometimes, it was simply the willingness to say:

I am not certain where this will lead, but I am willing to find out.

And for Vaasanthi, that was enough for the next step.

Chapter 20:

Vaasanthi had interviewed nearly a hundred people in the course of her career.

She had asked business leaders about failure, artists about rejection, teachers about responsibility, and people from different walks of life about the decisions that had shaped them. She had learned how to prepare for difficult conversations, how to listen without interrupting, and how to recognise the difference between an answer that sounded good and one that came from genuine reflection.

Yet, when she sat across from Sharat at a quiet restaurant one Saturday evening, she discovered that asking questions became surprisingly difficult when the answers could influence her own future.

They had agreed to meet outside the office, away from programme schedules, deadlines, and the familiar comfort of discussing work.

Sharat arrived a few minutes early. When Vaasanthi entered, he stood up and smiled.

“You look less tired today.”

“Is that your way of saying I usually look tired?”

“It's my way of saying that you look relaxed today.”

“That's better.”

They laughed and settled into their seats.

For a while, they spoke about ordinary things. Sharat told her about a film he had watched with his family. Vaasanthi described how her father had recently tried to teach her to make his favourite tea, insisting that the method was simple while making the process unnecessarily complicated.

“He told me that the tea needed patience,” she said. “Then he became impatient because I wasn't following his instructions.”

Sharat laughed.

“Perhaps he wanted to spend time with you more than he wanted you to learn tea-making.”

Vaasanthi paused.

She had not thought about it that way.

Perhaps her father had known that she could learn the recipe from a book or a video. Perhaps the instructions, the repeated corrections, and the unnecessary explanations had simply been his way of sharing a

little time with his daughter.

She smiled.

“You may be right.”

Their conversation gradually moved towards the reason they had met.

“Vaasanthi,” Sharat said, “I want you to feel comfortable telling me if you have doubts about this.”

“I do have doubts.”

He looked at her, surprised for a moment, then smiled.

“Good. Let's hear them.”

She appreciated that he had not immediately become defensive.

“I don't want us to decide anything because we like each other now and assume that everything else will work out later. We should understand what matters to each of us.”

“I agree.”

“My career is important to me. I have worked hard to reach where I am. I don't want to discover after marriage that I am expected to give up the work I love.”

Sharat nodded.

“I wouldn't expect that.”

“I also don't want to assume that marriage will be easy simply because we get along well. We will have different opinions. We may disappoint each other sometimes. There may be family responsibilities, work pressures, and decisions that neither of us likes.”

“True.”

“And I don't want silence to become our way of dealing with problems.”

She had not intended to say that last sentence so directly.

But once it was spoken, she realised it was the most important thing she wanted him to understand.

Sharat did not answer immediately.

“Can I ask why that matters so much to you?”

Vaasanthi looked at him.

She could have offered a general explanation. She could have spoken about the importance of communication, mutual respect, and understanding. Those were all true.

But she had decided that if she wanted a meaningful relationship, she could not keep the most important parts of herself hidden behind well-constructed answers.

“My parents lived apart for many years,” she said quietly. “They had their reasons, their hurt, and their own understanding of what had happened. But for a long time, neither of them found a way to move beyond it. I grew up without my father's affection, believing that he had chosen to leave me behind.”

Sharat listened without interrupting.

“Later, I discovered that the truth was more complicated. My father had tried to reach us, but my mother wasn't ready to speak to him. Eventually, he too began waiting. Years passed. There were mistakes on both sides, but the silence became bigger than the original disagreement.”

She paused.

“I cannot say that everything was simple or that one conversation would have solved every problem. But I know that they lost years they can never recover. And I grew up carrying questions that I should never have had to carry alone.”

Sharat's expression softened.

“How did they finally reconcile?”

“I took the first step. I met my father and listened to him. Then I told my mother. It was difficult. She was hurt that I had met him without telling her. But eventually, she agreed to speak to him. They apologised, listened, and decided to give their relationship another chance.”

“And how are things now?”

“Better. Not because they have forgotten everything, but because they are trying to do things differently.”

She looked directly at him.

“That is what I want in my own life. If something matters to me, I want to make an honest effort to preserve it. I don't want pride or fear to stop me from speaking. But I also don't want to become the only person trying to keep a relationship alive. Both people must be willing to participate.”

Sharat nodded slowly.

“I think that's fair.”

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She waited, allowing him time to think.

“I can't promise that I will always know what to say,” he continued. “And I may sometimes need time before I can discuss something properly. But I can promise that I won't deliberately leave an important issue unresolved simply because talking about it is uncomfortable.”

He paused.

“And if I need time, I should tell you that I need time, rather than disappearing into silence and expecting you to guess why.”

Vaasanthi felt something inside her relax. It was not a grand declaration of love. It was not a promise that they would never hurt each other.

It was an acknowledgement that he understood what she was asking for.

“Thank you,” she said.

Sharat smiled.

“Now I have a question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“You've told me what you want from a relationship. What are you willing to give it?”

The question surprised her.

She had spent much of the conversation explaining her expectations. She had spoken about the importance of communication, respect, and preserving individual ambitions.

She had not yet considered the question from his side.

“That's a fair question,” she said.

She thought for a moment.

“I can promise to be honest about what I feel. I can promise to listen when you disagree with me, and to apologise when I realise I have hurt you. I will try not to assume that I understand your intentions before hearing your explanation.”

She smiled faintly.

“I cannot promise that I will never become defensive. I know myself well enough to know that I sometimes do.”

“That's all right,” Sharat said. “I can become defensive too.”

“Then we'll have to remind each other.”

“Agreed.”

They both laughed.

For the first time that evening, Vaasanthi felt that they were no longer discussing whether a relationship might be possible. They were beginning to explore what kind of relationship they could build.

There was still much to learn about each other. But neither of them was pretending otherwise.

Over the following weeks, their conversations became more frequent.

Sometimes they met for coffee after work. Sometimes they spoke on the phone in the evening. They discussed their families, their ambitions, their habits, and the small preferences that often reveal more about a person than the answers to important questions.

Sharat discovered that Vaasanthi rarely watched television programmes for entertainment because she could not stop analysing their structure.

Vaasanthi discovered that Sharat enjoyed cooking on Sundays and was particularly proud of a dish his mother had taught him to prepare.

He discovered that she preferred quiet evenings at home after a demanding week.

She discovered that he sometimes went for long walks when he needed to think.

They began to understand each other's personalities without the pressure of trying to impress one another at every meeting.

One evening, Sharat asked her whether she had ever imagined the kind of family she wanted to build.

Vaasanthi considered the question.

“I want a home where people can speak honestly without being afraid that every disagreement will become a permanent wound. I want us to be able to say when something hurts, instead of pretending that it doesn't matter.”

She paused.

“And I want a home where silence can be peaceful. I don't want to feel that we must talk constantly. I simply don't want silence to become a punishment.”

Sharat nodded.

“That makes sense. Silence can be comfortable when two people trust each other. But when it becomes a way of making someone suffer, it changes everything.”

She looked at him.

“Exactly.”

“What about your work? Your responsibilities are only going to increase.”

“I know. I don't want to promise that I'll always be available at a particular hour. There will be deadlines, unexpected assignments, and difficult days.”

“I understand. My work has unpredictable hours too. We'll have to plan, adjust, and make time for each other.”

“And if one of us feels neglected?”

“We should say so.”

She smiled.

“You make that sound simple.”

“It isn't always simple. But it can still be straightforward.”

Vaasanthi thought about her parents again.

They had once allowed difficult conversations to become so complicated that neither could find a way back to the other. She did not want to repeat that pattern. She knew she could not guarantee that she and Sharat would never face misunderstandings, but she could choose not to treat a misunderstanding as the end of the conversation.

Their relationship was not yet a promise for a lifetime.It was a possibility they were examining with care.

And that made it feel more meaningful, not less.

A few days later, Sharat visited Vaasanthi's home to meet Radha and Kishan.

Vaasanthi had been more nervous about this meeting than she had expected.

At work, she could speak confidently before senior executives, lead meetings, and make decisions that affected an entire team. Yet the thought of introducing someone who might become her life partner to her parents made her unusually conscious of every detail.

Radha had prepared several dishes, although Vaasanthi had told her that a simple meal would be enough.

“Amma, we are meeting for lunch, not conducting an examination.”

Radha looked up from the kitchen counter.

“I know that.”

“Then why are you preparing enough food for ten people?”

“Because I want the food to be good.”

“And if the food is good, will you stop worrying?”

Radha smiled.

“No.”

Vaasanthi laughed and shook her head.

When Sharat arrived, Kishan welcomed him warmly. Radha joined them, and the first few minutes were spent exchanging greetings and talking about work.

Kishan asked Sharat about his family and how he had entered the programming field. Radha asked about his parents, their occupations, and whether they lived nearby.

Sharat answered respectfully, without making the conversation feel like an interview.

Gradually, the atmosphere became more relaxed.

At lunch, Kishan began telling a story about Vaasanthi's first television appearance. He described how he had watched her report on a traffic problem and how he had been so nervous that he had forgotten to listen to half of what she was saying.

“After the report, I called her immediately,” he said.

Vaasanthi looked at him.

“Dad, you called me to tell me that I had spoken too quickly.”

“Yes, but I was proud of you.”

“You could have started with that.”

“I thought the correction was more useful.”

Everyone laughed.

Radha looked at Sharat.

“She has always been determined. Even as a child, once she decided to do something, she wanted to do it properly.”

Sharat smiled.

“I have noticed that.”

“Sometimes too properly,” Kishan added.

“Daddy!”

He laughed.

For Vaasanthi, the exchange was more than a pleasant family conversation. It was a reminder of how far they had come.

There had been a time when Kishan's name was rarely mentioned in their home. Radha and Vaasanthi had lived with an absence that had gradually become part of their daily life.

Now he was sitting at the dining table, telling stories about his daughter, teasing her, and asking the young man who might marry her about his ambitions.

Nothing could return the years they had lost.

But the present was no longer being sacrificed to the past.

After lunch, Radha asked Sharat to sit with her and Kishan in the living room while Vaasanthi went to the kitchen to help clear the table.

Kishan spoke first.

“Sharat, we are happy that you and Vaasanthi are getting to know each other. We don't want to make a decision for her. She must be comfortable with the person she chooses.”

Sharat nodded.

“I agree, uncle.”

Radha continued, “She has worked very hard to build her career. We hope she will be able to continue doing the work she loves.”

“I respect her career, aunty. I would never ask her to give it up.”

Kishan looked at him thoughtfully.

“And if you disagree about something?”

Sharat smiled gently.

“Then I hope we will discuss it. I can't promise that we will always agree, but I can promise that I will try to understand her side before deciding that I am right.”

Kishan nodded.

“That is important.”

He paused before adding, “And she must do the same for you. **A relationship cannot depend on one person always making the effort.”**

“I understand, uncle.”

From the kitchen doorway, Vaasanthi heard the conversation. She had not intended to listen, but she found herself standing still for a moment.

Her father was not asking Sharat to promise that he would never hurt her. He was asking him to respect the relationship enough to keep working at it.

Perhaps Kishan understood that question better than most people.

He had learned, through his own mistakes, how costly it could be when people allowed pride and silence to make their decisions.

When Vaasanthi returned to the living room, Radha was smiling.

“We have had a good conversation,” her mother said.

Sharat looked at Vaasanthi.

“I think I passed the interview.”

She laughed.

“Don't be too confident. My mother may have another round of questions.”

Radha pretended to look offended.

“I am not conducting interviews.”

Kishan smiled.

“Of course not. You're only checking whether he has answered everything correctly.”

The room filled with laughter.

And for Vaasanthi, the sound carried a quiet happiness that she would once have struggled to imagine.

Later that evening, after Sharat had left, Vaasanthi sat with her parents.

Radha looked at her daughter.

“What do you think?”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“I like him. I feel comfortable talking to him. But I want us to make the decision thoughtfully.”

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“Good,” Radha replied. “You don't have to rush.”

Kishan nodded.

“Marriage is a serious commitment. Take the time you need to understand each other.”

Vaasanthi looked at him.

“Daddy, do you ever think about how different things might have been if you and Amma had spoken to each other earlier?”

The question brought a brief silence. Radha lowered her eyes. Kishan looked towards the window.

“Yes,” he said finally. “I think about it.”

“Do you think you could have solved everything?”

“No. I cannot say that. We had real problems, and we might still have faced difficulties even if we had spoken earlier. But perhaps we would have understood each other better. Perhaps we would have made different decisions. Perhaps we would not have lost so much time.”

He paused.

“The hardest part is knowing that I cannot change what happened. I can only make sure that I don't repeat the same mistakes now.”

Radha reached for his hand.

“I have those thoughts too,” she said quietly. “Sometimes I wonder what our life would have been like if we had both been willing to listen sooner.”

Vaasanthi felt a familiar ache, but it was no longer the sharp pain of childhood. It was the sadness of recognising something that could not be repaired completely, even after reconciliation.

“That's why I want to be careful,” she said. “Not fearful. Just careful. I don't want to enter a relationship believing that love alone will solve every problem. I want us to learn how to speak to each other.”

Radha smiled.

“Then you are already thinking about it in the right way.”

Kishan looked at his daughter.

“And remember, taking the first step doesn't mean you must always be the one to take it. It means you should not let pride stop you from doing what you believe is right. The other person must also take responsibility for the relationship.”

Vaasanthi nodded.

Those words mattered because they came from a man who had lived through the consequences of waiting.

He was not asking her to carry the burden of every relationship she entered. He was reminding her that she could make her own choices honestly, without trying to control the choices of others.

That was the balance she wanted to carry into her future.

A week later, Sharat and Vaasanthi met again.

This time, their conversation was shorter, but it brought them closer to a decision.

“I spoke to my parents,” Sharat said. “I told them about you and explained that we are considering marriage.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“What did they say?”

“They would like to meet you. My mother has already asked me what sweets you prefer.”

Vaasanthi laughed.

“Your mother seems to be moving faster than we are.”

“She says that asking about sweets is not the same as arranging a wedding.”

“Your mother sounds sensible.”

“She is. She also says that if two people are serious about each other, they should give their families an opportunity to know one another.”

Vaasanthi considered that.

“I agree.”

Sharat looked at her.

“Then shall we take the next step?”

She understood what he meant.

They had spent weeks talking, listening, and learning about each other. They had discussed careers, families, expectations, and the importance of addressing problems rather than allowing them to grow through silence.

They had not discovered every answer. They had not eliminated every uncertainty.

But they had reached a point where both wanted to move forward.

“Yes,” Vaasanthi said. “Let's arrange a meeting with your parents.”

Sharat smiled.

“I'm glad.”

She looked at him for a moment.

“Sharat?”

“Yes?”

“If we decide to marry, I want us to remember something. There may be times when we are both hurt, or both convinced that we are right. I want us to remember that the relationship matters more than winning an argument.”

He nodded.

“I want that too.”

“And if one of us needs to apologise, we should be able to do it without feeling that we have lost something.”

“Agreed.”

She smiled.

“Then we have a good place to begin.”

They walked out together.

The afternoon was bright, and the city moved around them with its usual impatience. There were deadlines waiting for Vaasanthi at the office, family conversations waiting for Sharat at home, and decisions ahead that neither of them could fully predict.

But something had become clearer.

They were not choosing each other because they believed they would never face difficulty.

They were choosing to explore a future because they believed that difficulty could be faced honestly, together.

For Vaasanthi, that distinction made all the difference.

She had once believed that love was dangerous because it gave another person the power to hurt her.

Now she understood that a meaningful relationship required courage of a different kind: the courage to be known, the courage to speak, the courage to listen, and the courage to make an effort without demanding control over the outcome.

She could not guarantee that every bond would last forever. She could not guarantee that every sincere

attempt would be returned.

But she could choose not to let fear make every decision for her.

As they reached the end of the street, Sharat asked whether she would like to call him later that evening.

“Of course,” she said.

He smiled.

“Good. I'll speak to you then.”

They went their separate ways.

Vaasanthi watched him walk towards his car, then turned towards the road leading to the office.

She had taken another first step.

This time, it was not towards a lost relationship or an unanswered question.

It was towards a future she had chosen for herself.

And she was ready to discover what they could build together.

Chapter 21:

Vaasanthi had always believed that understanding a person required time.

People could speak beautifully about their values, make convincing promises, and describe the kind of life they wanted to lead. But their true nature often emerged in moments they had not prepared for—in the way they reacted when plans failed, when someone disagreed with them, when they were inconvenienced, or when another person's needs interrupted their own.

She had learned this through her interviews. She had also learned it through her parents.

Now, as her relationship with Sharat moved towards a more serious commitment, she found herself paying attention to the little things.

She noticed whether he listened when she spoke about her work. She noticed whether he respected her decisions even when he had a different opinion. She noticed whether he expected her to agree with him s imply because he had expressed his view confidently.

She did not consciously set out to test him.

But she was beginning to understand that choosing a life partner was not only about asking whether two people liked each other.

It was also about discovering how they behaved when liking each other was not enough.

And life, as it often did, soon gave her an opportunity to find out.

The First Incident — The Evening He Waited

The special programme was supposed to finish by six in the evening.

Vaasanthi had promised Sharat that she would meet him afterwards. They had planned to visit a bookstore and then have dinner together. It was the first time in several weeks that both had managed to keep an evening free.

At five-thirty, everything appeared to be going according to schedule.

Then the news arrived.

A major public hospital had announced an important initiative to provide affordable treatment to patients from economically weaker backgrounds. The announcement was significant, but the details were confusing.

The channel needed to verify the information before broadcasting it, and the editorial team decided to include a short special report.

Vaasanthi reviewed the available information, contacted the hospital's communication office, and asked the research team to confirm the details.

By six, she knew she would not be leaving on time.

She called Sharat.

“I am sorry. Something urgent has come up. I don't think I can make it by seven.”

“What's happened?”

She explained the situation.

“How late do you think you'll be?”

“I honestly don't know. Perhaps an hour. Perhaps more.”

There was a brief pause.

“Do you want me to wait?”

Vaasanthi looked at the notes on her desk.

“No, Sharat. Please don't. I'll have to concentrate on this, and I don't want you to lose your evening because of me. Let's postpone it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I'm sorry.”

“Don't apologise for doing your job. Just let me know when you get a chance.”

She ended the call and returned to work.

For the next two hours, the newsroom was unusually busy. The hospital's announcement had attracted considerable attention, and every department wanted to ensure that the channel's coverage was accurate. One figure in the original press release did not match the information provided by the hospital's administrative office. Vaasanthi insisted that the discrepancy be clarified before the report went on air.

By the time the programme was ready, it was nearly eight-thirty.

She finally leaned back in her chair.

Her eyes were tired, her shoulders ached, and the dinner she had planned to enjoy with Sharat had become a forgotten detail in an evening of deadlines.

She picked up her phone and sent him a message.

The report is finally done. I'm sorry our plan didn't work out.

His reply came almost immediately.

I'm glad you got it done properly. Have you eaten anything?

She stared at the message.

She had not.

Before she could reply, another message arrived.

I'm still near the office. If you're free, we can have something simple. If you're too tired, I'll drop you home. Your choice.

Vaasanthi sat still for a moment.

He had not said that he had wasted his evening waiting for her. He had not complained that she had prioritised work over him. He had not asked her to make up for the cancelled plan.

He had simply left the decision with her.

She called him.

“You're still near the office?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn't you go home?”

“I was in a bookstore nearby. I thought I would finish what I had gone there to do. Then I had coffee.”

“You could have told me you were waiting.”

“I wasn't waiting in the way you're imagining,” he said gently. “I had my own evening. I just kept the possibility of meeting you open.”

She smiled despite her tiredness.

“That is a very diplomatic answer.”

“It's also the truth.”

She laughed.

“All right. I'll join you for dinner, but only if you promise not to let me discuss the hospital report throughout the meal.”

“I was planning to ask you not to discuss the hospital report throughout the meal.”

“Then we have an agreement.”

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They met at a small restaurant a short distance from the office.

When Vaasanthi arrived, Sharat stood up and pulled out a chair for her. He had already ordered nothing, knowing she would prefer to choose for herself.

She sat down and looked at him.

“You really aren't upset?”

He seemed puzzled.

“About what?”

“About the fact that I cancelled our plan.”

“Vaasanthi, I was looking forward to spending the evening with you. Of course, I'm disappointed that we couldn't follow the original plan. But that doesn't mean you did something wrong.”

She listened carefully.

“You had an important responsibility. You handled it. We can meet another day.”

He paused.

“And if this becomes a regular pattern, we'll have to talk about how we manage our time. I would want us to make space for each other. But one unexpected evening shouldn't become a problem between us.”

There was something deeply reassuring about his answer.

He had not pretended that her time did not matter to him. He had admitted that he had been looking forward to meeting her. But he had also understood that a professional responsibility could occasionally interrupt a personal plan without diminishing the importance of the person waiting.

Vaasanthi looked down at the menu.

“I think I would have felt terrible if you had spent the evening waiting for me and then complained about it.”

Sharat smiled.

“Then I would have had two problems. First, the evening didn't go according to plan. Second, I would have made you feel guilty about something you couldn't entirely control.”

She looked up.

“Do you always think this much?”

“Only when I want to impress someone.”

She laughed.

“That's a dangerous habit.”

“I'll try to manage it.”

They ordered dinner and began talking about other things.

At one point, Sharat asked her about the book she had been reading. She told him about a story she had recently encountered while preparing an interview. He listened, asked a few questions, and then spoke about a book he had enjoyed as a student.

The evening became comfortable.

For the first time since their relationship had begun, Vaasanthi noticed that she was not monitoring every moment, wondering whether she had said too much or whether he might misunderstand something she had said.

She was simply enjoying his company.

On the way home, she looked out of the car window and thought about what had happened.

Sharat had not made a grand sacrifice for her. He had not cancelled an important commitment of his own or made a dramatic declaration about how much he cared.

He had done something smaller.

He had allowed her to fulfil her responsibility without making her feel that she had failed him.

That mattered to her more than she could easily explain.

She had spent much of her childhood feeling that relationships could turn into obligations she did not understand. She had worried about the expectations people carried, the disappointments they concealed, and the resentment that sometimes emerged long after an incident had passed.

With Sharat, she had experienced something different. He could express disappointment without using it as a weapon.

He could value her time without demanding control over it.

And he could make room for her work without making her feel that she had to choose between her ambition and her personal life.

When she reached home, she sent him a message.

Thank you for tonight. I enjoyed it more than I expected to, especially after the way the evening began.

His reply came a few minutes later.

So did I. Next time, let's choose a day when neither of us has a deadline waiting to surprise us.

She smiled at the screen.

Then, almost unconsciously, she saved his message.

It was a small thing.

But Vaasanthi was beginning to discover that the small things were often where trust began.

The Second Incident — The Question He Did Not Force Her to Answer

A few weeks later, Vaasanthi faced one of the most difficult days she had experienced since becoming CEO of the editorial division.

The channel had planned a special programme featuring several people who had worked on a rural education initiative. One of the guests had withdrawn at the last minute, and a disagreement had developed between two members of the production team about how to restructure the programme.

At the same time, management wanted an update on the next month's schedule.

Vaasanthi spent the entire afternoon resolving the problems.

By the time she returned home, she was exhausted. She did not feel like talking to anyone.

Radha noticed immediately.

“Are you all right?”

“I'm fine, Amma. Just tired.”

“Have you eaten?”

“I'll eat in a little while.”

Radha looked at her daughter, recognising the familiar expression that meant Vaasanthi wanted some time to herself.

“Rest for a while. I'll keep your dinner ready.”

Vaasanthi went to her room, changed, and sat near the window.

She was not angry with anyone in particular. She was simply tired of having to make decisions, explain those decisions, and remain composed when everyone around her seemed to need something from her.

For a moment, she missed the days when her responsibilities had been limited to preparing questions and conducting interviews.

Then she reminded herself that she had worked hard for the position she now held. She could not expect leadership to be easy.

Still, she wished that someone would understand how exhausting it could be to appear confident when she was uncertain, to remain patient when she was frustrated, and to make decisions while knowing that not everyone would agree with them.

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Her phone rang.

It was Sharat.

She answered.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Vaasanthi. How was your day?”

“Fine.”

There was a pause.

He knew her well enough by now to recognise that her answer was not the whole truth.

“Fine in the usual sense, or fine in the sense that you don't want to discuss it?”

She almost smiled.

“The second one.”

“All right.”

He did not ask what had happened. He did not try to persuade her to talk.

He simply said, “Would you like me to call later, or would you prefer to rest?”

Vaasanthi was surprised by how much the question mattered.

Most people, when they sensed that something was wrong, wanted to know what had happened. They asked questions because they cared, but sometimes their concern made it harder for her to gather her thoughts.

Sharat had offered her a choice.

“I think I would like to rest for a while,” she said. “I'm not ready to talk about the day.”

“That's fine. Get some rest. I'll speak to you later.”

She hesitated.

“Sharat?”

“Yes?”

“You aren't wondering what happened?”

“I am wondering,” he admitted. “But I don't need to know everything immediately. If you want to tell me later, I'll listen.”

Something softened inside her.

“Thank you.”

“Take care, Vaasanthi.”

After the call ended, she placed the phone beside her and leaned back in her chair.

She had expected that his response would bring relief. She had not expected it to bring tears to her eyes.

Not because he had done something extraordinary, but because he had understood something she had rarely been able to explain.

Vaasanthi did not always need someone to solve her problems. She did not always need advice, encouragement, or a detailed discussion about what she should do differently.

Sometimes she needed a little time to understand her own feelings before sharing them.

She had often been afraid that if she admitted she was tired, uncertain, or hurt, people might see her differently. She had built a reputation for being practical and composed, and she sometimes felt compelled to live up to it even when she wanted to set it aside.

Sharat had not demanded that she be cheerful for his sake.

He had allowed her to be quiet without making her silence a problem.

Later that evening, after dinner, Vaasanthi called him.

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“Are you free?”

“Yes. How are you feeling now?”

“Better.”

“Good.”

She sat on the edge of her bed.

“I wanted to tell you what happened today.”

He listened as she described the problems at work, the conflicting expectations, and her frustration at having to resolve everything within a limited time.

She did not make herself sound more capable than she had felt. She admitted that she had become impatient during the meeting and had later wondered whether she could have handled the situation more calmly.

When she finished, Sharat did not immediately offer advice.

Instead, he asked, “Do you want me to help you think through what happened, or did you just want to tell someone about it?”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“Can I say both?”

“Of course.”

She explained what she thought she had handled well and what she might do differently next time. Sharat offered a few observations, but he did not treat the conversation as an opportunity to instruct her.

At one point, he said, “You seem to believe that because you're responsible for the final decision, you must also be responsible for preventing everyone from being disappointed.”

She became quiet.

The observation had struck close to home.

“Perhaps I do.”

“But you can't guarantee that, can you?”

“No.”

“Then perhaps your responsibility is to make the best decision you can, explain it honestly, and be willing to reconsider it if you discover you've missed something. You cannot make every person happy with the outcome.”

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Vaasanthi considered his words.

“You sound like my editor.”

“Your editor sounds like a sensible man.”

She laughed.

Then she grew thoughtful again.

“Do you know what I find difficult?”

“What?”

“Sometimes, when people disagree with me, I begin to feel that I have failed them. I know that's not always logical. But I think I carry that feeling into other parts of my life, too.”

Sharat remained quiet, giving her room to continue.

“I don't want the people I care about to feel that I don't value them. But I also don't want to lose myself trying to make sure nobody is disappointed with me.”

He answered gently.

“Then I think you need to remember that caring about someone doesn't mean you must agree with them all the time. And if someone cares about you, they should be able to understand that you have your own

responsibilities, feelings, and limits.”

Vaasanthi felt a deep sense of recognition.

It was not that he had discovered something she had never known. She had said similar things in interviews,

written them in her notebook, and discussed them with her parents.

But hearing the same principle from someone who was beginning to matter personally to her made it feel different.

She had spent years learning to protect herself by depending on herself.

Now she was discovering that trusting another person did not necessarily mean surrendering her independence.

It could mean allowing that person to see the parts of her she usually kept hidden, without fearing that those parts would make her less worthy of respect.

“Sharat,” she said after a while.

“Yes?”

“I think you understand me better than I expected.”

He was silent for a moment.

“I am trying to understand you. I don't think I know everything about you yet.”

She smiled.

“That's a sensible answer.”

“I have my moments.”

She laughed softly.

Then he added, “You don't have to explain every silence to me, Vaasanthi. But if your silence means that something is troubling you about us, I hope you'll tell me when you're ready. I may not always understand immediately, but I want the opportunity to understand.”

Vaasanthi closed her eyes briefly. That was what she had wanted.

Not someone who could read her mind. Not someone who would never misunderstand her.

Someone who would give her space when she needed it, and still remain willing to have the conversation when the time was right.

She had once thought that emotional safety meant never having to depend on anyone.

Now she was beginning to understand that it could also mean knowing that she did not have to perform strength every moment of the day.

“I will,” she said. “And I hope you will do the same with me.”

“I will.”

They continued talking for a while, but the conversation gradually moved towards ordinary things. Sharat told her about a mistake he had made at work and how his colleague had helped him correct it. Vaasanthi teased him about the story, and he protested that she was showing very little sympathy.

By the time they ended the call, she felt lighter.

She had not needed to become a different person to be understood.

He had simply made room for the person she already was.

Understanding the Person Behind the Position

As the weeks passed, Vaasanthi's feelings for Sharat became clearer.

She liked his intelligence, his humour, and his ability to discuss difficult subjects without making them unnecessarily complicated.

But what drew her closer to him was something deeper.

He did not treat her professional success as a threat to his own importance. When she received praise, he was genuinely pleased. When she faced a problem, he did not use it as an opportunity to question whether she deserved her position.

He respected her independence without treating it as a reason to remain distant.

And he was beginning to understand that Vaasanthi's practical nature did not mean she lacked emotion.

It meant she had learned to be careful with it.

One evening, they met at a park after work. The weather was pleasant, and the paths were filled with families, children, and people taking their evening walks.

They found a quiet bench and sat down.

“Can I tell you something?” Sharat asked.

“Of course.”

“When I first met you, I thought you were extremely confident.”

Vaasanthi laughed.

“That's interesting.”

“Why?”

“Because I spent a considerable amount of time wondering whether I was capable of doing my job.”

He looked at her.

“You didn't show it.”

“I was good at hiding it.”

She paused.

“I think I learned quite early that if I appeared strong, people were less likely to ask questions I didn't know how to answer.”

Sharat listened.

“I became practical because it felt safer. If I could analyse a situation, understand the facts, and make a decision, I didn't have to depend on how someone else felt about me.”

“And now?”

“Now I think practicality is useful, but it isn't enough. You can understand a situation logically and still miss what it means to another person.”

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She looked at him.

“I've also learned that emotions aren't necessarily a weakness. Sometimes they tell you that something matters enough to deserve your attention.”

Sharat smiled.

“That sounds like the Vaasanthi I have come to know.”

She turned towards him.

“What do you mean?”

“You are confident, but you don't pretend to have all the answers. You are practical, but you care deeply about people. You can be independent, but you don't believe that independence gives you permission to ignore the people around you.”

He paused.

“And when something matters to you, you think about it seriously. Sometimes perhaps too seriously.”

She laughed.

“That last part was unnecessary.”

“It was also accurate.”

She shook her head, smiling.

Then Sharat became more thoughtful.

“I think I understand something else about you. When you take time to make a decision, it isn't always because you are uncertain about what you want. Sometimes you are trying to make sure that you won't hurt someone, disappoint them, or make a choice you will regret later.”

Vaasanthi looked at him in surprise.

He continued.

“But I hope you remember that you are allowed to make choices for yourself, too. You can care about your parents, your colleagues, and the people you love without making their happiness your sole responsibility.”

For a moment, she could not answer.

It was one thing to hear someone praise her work. It was another to hear someone recognise the struggle beneath her behaviour.

Sharat had not merely noticed what she did. He had begun to understand why she sometimes did it.

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And he had not asked her to change her nature to make the relationship easier for him.

Instead, he was encouraging her to give herself the same consideration she offered others.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

He looked at her.

“Have I said something wrong?”

“No.”

She smiled.

“You have said something that I needed to hear.”

They sat quietly for a while.

The silence did not feel awkward. Vaasanthi did not feel compelled to fill it with another question or explanation.

She simply enjoyed being there with him.

After a few minutes, she spoke again.

“Sharat, I think I am beginning to understand why I like you.”

He turned towards her, smiling.

“I was hoping there was a reason.”

She laughed.

“Don't spoil the moment.”

“I'm listening.”

She looked at him seriously.

“I like that you don't make me feel that I have to choose between being strong and being understood. I can disagree with you without feeling that I am disappointing you. I can tell you that I am tired without having to prove that I deserve to rest. And I can speak about my fears without feeling that you will think less of me.”

Sharat listened carefully.

“I am glad you feel that way,” he said. “Because I don't want you to have to become someone else to be with me.”

She held his gaze.

“And I don't want you to feel that you must always understand me perfectly. I want us to keep trying.”

He smiled.

“Then perhaps we have something worth building.”

Vaasanthi smiled back.

“Yes. I think we do.”

The Decision

A few days later, Vaasanthi and Sharat arranged a meeting between their families.

This time, the conversation was more settled. Both families had already heard about the possibility of marriage, and the meeting was an opportunity for everyone to become better acquainted.

Sharat's parents were warm and welcoming. His mother spoke to Vaasanthi about her work and listened with interest as she described the editorial division she was leading. His father asked about her parents and the family they had built.

There were questions about practical matters, as there should be. Their expectations regarding work, family responsibilities, and future plans needed to be understood before they made a commitment.

Vaasanthi appreciated that the conversation was open rather than ceremonial.

At one point, Sharat's mother said, “You have achieved a great deal at a young age. Marriage will bring changes, of course, but we hope you will continue to do the work you enjoy.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“Thank you, aunty. I would like that. I also understand that both of us will have responsibilities, and we will need to manage them together.”

Sharat's father nodded.

“That is sensible. A marriage works better when people discuss their expectations rather than assume the other person will somehow understand them.”

Vaasanthi exchanged a brief smile with Sharat.

She thought of the conversations they had already shared and felt grateful that they had taken the time to have them.

After the meeting, Sharat walked with her towards the gate.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Good.”

“Only good?”

She smiled.

“Happy. A little nervous. But mostly happy.”

“That's fair.”

She stopped walking and turned towards him.

“Sharat, I have thought about this carefully.”

He waited.

“I would like to marry you.”

For a moment, he seemed unable to respond. Then his face broke into a smile.

“I would like to marry you too, Vaasanthi.”

She laughed softly.

“I know. But I wanted to say it clearly.”

“I'm glad you did.”

She looked at him.

“I don't want us to believe that today's decision means we have finished understanding each other. I think that work will continue throughout our lives.”

“I agree.”

“We will make mistakes. We will have disagreements. There may be times when one of us feels hurt and the other doesn't immediately understand why.”

“Probably.”

“And when that happens, I want us to remember what we have discussed. We should make an honest effort to understand each other rather than allow silence to make the decision for us.”

Sharat took a moment before answering.

“I promise to make that effort. Not because I think we can prevent every problem, but because I believe the relationship deserves it.”

Vaasanthi felt a quiet certainty settle within her.

She was not choosing Sharat because she believed he would never disappoint her.

She was choosing him because, through their conversations and their experiences together, she had seen

evidence of the kind of person he was becoming in her life.

He was patient without being indifferent.

He was understanding without pretending to know everything.

He respected her independence while making it clear that he wanted to share her life.

And when she had been tired, uncertain, or unable to explain herself immediately, he had not turned her vulnerability into a reason to doubt her strength.

She knew that a lifetime would reveal new sides of both of them.

But she felt ready to discover those sides together.

That evening, Vaasanthi sat with Radha and Kishan and told them that she had agreed to marry Sharat.

Radha's eyes filled with tears.

“Are you happy, Vaasanthi?”

“Yes, Amma.”

“Are you sure?”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“I am sure that I want to take this step. I know we will still have things to learn about each other. But I feel that we can talk honestly, and I trust him enough to begin.”

Kishan nodded, visibly moved.

“That is a good beginning.”

Radha held her daughter's hand.

“I hope you build a beautiful life together.”

Vaasanthi looked at both her parents.

“I hope so too. And I want to thank you both for something.”

They looked at her.

“For allowing me to make this decision in my own time. You have shared your thoughts, but you haven't tried to decide for me.”

Radha smiled.

“You have grown up, Vaasanthi. Our responsibility is to guide you when you need guidance, not to live your life for you.”

Kishan added, “And we want you to have the kind of relationship in which you can speak freely, even when

you disagree.”

Vaasanthi reached for his hand.

“I want that too, Daddy.”

For a moment, she remembered the little girl who had stood across the road, watching her father from a distance because she did not know whether she was allowed to approach him.

She remembered the years when she had wondered whether he had forgotten her.

She remembered the questions she had carried, the anger she had tried to suppress, and the fear that had convinced her that relationships were safer when kept at a distance.

She could not return to that little girl and give her the childhood she had missed.

But she could honour her by choosing a different future.

She could enter marriage without pretending that love guaranteed a life without pain. She could build a relationship without assuming that independence required emotional distance. She could remain strong without making herself inaccessible.

And she could remember that the purpose of taking the first step was not to control another person's response.

It was to give a meaningful bond the opportunity to exist.

Later that night, Vaasanthi opened her notebook.

For years, she had recorded the lessons she learned from the people she interviewed. She had written about courage, failure, responsibility, forgiveness, and the importance of honest conversations.

Now she wrote about something more personal.

I used to think that a person who understood me would know what I was feeling without my having to explain it.

I now understand that understanding is not magic. It is attention. It is patience. It is asking a question without demanding an immediate answer. It is listening without preparing a defence. It is recognising that the person beside you may be strong in one moment and vulnerable in the next.

Sharat has not promised to understand me perfectly. He has shown me that he is willing to keep understanding me.

And I must offer him the same willingness.

She paused before writing the final lines.

Perhaps this is what I have been learning all along.

Taking the first step does not mean walking towards someone while forgetting who I am.

It means having enough faith in the value of a relationship to show up honestly, and enough respect for myself and the other person to allow us both to remain human.

She closed the notebook.

Tomorrow, preparations for the wedding would begin. There would be family discussions, arrangements, decisions, and the thousand little details that accompanied such an important occasion.

But tonight, Vaasanthi felt no need to rush towards the future.

She was happy to remain with the knowledge that she had chosen thoughtfully.

She had not found a person who could promise her a life without misunderstandings.

She had found someone with whom she believed misunderstandings could be discussed.

She had not found a person who would always know what she needed.

She had found someone willing to ask.

And she had not found a person who would never make mistakes.

She had found someone who appeared willing to acknowledge them and learn from them.

For Vaasanthi, these were not small things.

They were the foundations upon which a meaningful relationship could be built.

She switched off the light, feeling grateful for the journey that had brought her here.

The girl who once believed that relationships were safer at a distance was preparing to build a home of her own.

Not because she had forgotten what silence could do.

But because she had finally understood what honest communication, mutual effort, and the courage to take

the first step could make possible.

And this time, she would not enter that future alone.

She would enter it with her eyes open, her heart willing, and her feet firmly on the ground.

Chapter 22:

The morning of Vaasanthi's wedding arrived with the kind of happiness that did not need to announce itself.

It was present in the hurried footsteps outside the rooms, in the fragrance of jasmine filling the house, in the sound of relatives calling one another from different corners, and in the occasional laughter that rose above the gentle chaos of wedding preparations.

The house was alive.

And for the first time in many years, Vaasanthi felt that every important person in her life belonged to the same picture.

Her mother, Radha, was standing beside the dressing table, carefully arranging the flowers in Vaasanthi's hair. Her hands were steady, but her eyes kept filling with tears.

"Amma," Vaasanthi said, looking at her through the mirror, "if you keep crying, the flowers will think they are being arranged for a funeral instead of a wedding."

Radha laughed through her tears.

"Even on your wedding day, you have to make fun of me?"

"Someone has to keep you practical."

"Practical?" Radha smiled. "You are the one who taught me that not every emotion needs to be hidden behind a practical explanation."

Vaasanthi turned towards her mother. For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Radha gently touched her daughter's cheek.

"When did you grow up so much?"

Vaasanthi smiled and said, "Perhaps when you were not looking."

Radha's smile faded into tenderness.

"No, child. I was looking. I was always looking at you. But there were years when I was so occupied with my own pain that I failed to see how much you were missing."

Vaasanthi took her mother's hand.

"Amma, we cannot go back and give those years another ending. But we can give the years ahead a better beginning."

Radha lowered her eyes.

Those words had once been meant for her father. Now, they had become a promise between mother and daughter.

"I only wish," Radha whispered, "that I had understood this earlier."

Vaasanthi embraced her.

“Then let us not waste today wishing for yesterday.”

Radha held her daughter tightly.

Some apologies did not need to be repeated every morning. Sometimes, the most beautiful apology was a person who had understood their mistake and was trying, every day, to live differently.

That morning, Radha was doing exactly that.

In another room, Kishan stood before a mirror, adjusting the collar of his traditional attire.

He had checked it three times already. On the fourth attempt, he stopped and laughed at himself.

He had faced professional setbacks, financial uncertainties, difficult decisions, and years of loneliness. Yet nothing had made him as nervous as the thought of walking beside his daughter on her wedding day.

He had imagined this moment countless times.

In some versions of that imagination, Vaasanthi was a little girl holding his finger. In others, she was a young woman running towards him after school, carrying stories she could not wait to share.

For years, those moments had existed only in his mind.

Now, the daughter he had missed through so many seasons was about to begin a new chapter of her life.

A gentle knock interrupted his thoughts.

It was Sharat.

“Uncle, everyone is waiting.”

Kishan turned.

“Am I looking all right?”

Sharat smiled. “You look like a man who is about to give away his daughter but is secretly hoping the wedding can be postponed by another ten years.”

Kishan laughed.

“That obvious?”

“Only to another man who is trying very hard not to look nervous.”

Kishan placed a hand on Sharat’s shoulder.

“Take care of her.”

Sharat's expression became serious.

“I will care for her, Uncle. But I also want her to know that she must never stop taking care of herself. Her dreams, her work, her opinions—they are all part of the woman I want to marry.”

Kishan studied him for a moment.

He saw no grand promise in the young man's face. There was something better: an understanding that love was not ownership, and marriage was not a request for someone to become smaller so that another person could feel bigger.

“Then you have understood something important,” Kishan said.

“What is that, Uncle?”

“My daughter does not need someone to rescue her from life. She needs someone who will walk beside her through it.”

Sharat nodded.

“That is exactly what I hope to do.”

Kishan's eyes grew moist.

“Then go and bring her into our lives officially. We have waited long enough for happiness.”

When Vaasanthi entered the wedding hall, the music softened and the people around her turned towards the entrance.

She wore a beautiful traditional saree, its borders catching the warm light. Jasmine rested in her hair. Her eyes searched the hall, not for the decorations or the guests, but for the faces that mattered most.

She found Radha. She found Kishan… And then she found Sharat.

He was looking at her with a smile that seemed to say he was happy not because she had become a bride, but because she had chosen to begin this journey with him.

For a fleeting second, Vaasanthi remembered the woman she had once been.

The young reporter who believed emotions were liabilities.

The daughter who had learned to live without asking why her father was absent.

The woman who had convinced herself that if she expected nothing from relationships, relationships would never have the power to hurt her.

She had built a life around that belief. It had made her efficient, independent, and capable. But it had also taught her to mistake distance for strength and silence for protection.

She had not changed in a single day.

She had changed through conversations, uncomfortable questions, unexpected meetings, and the courage to hear truths she might once have avoided.

Most importantly, she had learned that opening one's heart did not mean surrendering one's judgment.

It meant giving a meaningful relationship a fair chance.

Sharat extended his hand...

Vaasanthi placed hers in it.

His fingers closed gently around hers.

“Ready?” he whispered.

She looked at him.

“Not completely.”

He smiled. “Good. Neither am I.”

She laughed.

“Then we are beginning honestly.”

“That's the only way I know how to begin with you.”

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And together, they walked forward.

The wedding ceremony unfolded amidst blessings, music, and the quiet happiness of two families coming together.

When Kishan stood beside Vaasanthi, his hands trembled slightly.

She noticed.

“Daddy,” she whispered, “are you nervous?”

He looked at her, surprised by the word.

Daddy.

It had come naturally from her lips.

For years, he had wondered whether he would ever hear it spoken with affection rather than uncertainty. Now, it had arrived in the middle of an ordinary sentence, as if it had been waiting patiently for the right moment.

He swallowed the emotion in his throat.

“A little.”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“You don't have to be nervous. I'm not going anywhere.”

He looked at her with eyes full of love.

“I know, child. But today I am remembering all the days I was not there.”

She gently squeezed his hand and said, “Then remember this day too. You are here now.”

Kishan nodded, unable to answer.

Sometimes, healing did not erase the past. It gave the present enough love to stop the past from occupying every corner of the heart.

When the ceremony reached its most important moments, Vaasanthi looked towards her parents.

Radha was smiling at Kishan and Kishan was looking at Radha.

There was no pretending that their years apart had never happened.

No one could return the missed

birthdays, the family conversations that never took place, or the ordinary evenings that had belonged to other families but not to theirs.

Yet they were standing together.

Not as the people they had been fifteen years earlier, carrying unspoken accusations and waiting for the other to move first, but as two people who had finally understood the cost of waiting.

Radha caught Kishan's eye.

She smiled.

He smiled back.

It was a small exchange. No announcement accompanied it. No one in the hall knew how much history had passed through those two smiles.But Vaasanthi saw them.

And she understood that sometimes the greatest gift parents could give their child was not a perfect marriage or an unbroken family history.

It was the courage to admit that they had been wrong, the humility to begin again, and the willingness to make the remaining years better than the years they had lost.

Kishan and Radha came together and had family photo with the wedding couple.

They blessed the wedding couple.

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For kishan it was the moment of life.

For any father it would be moment of life to get his daughter married of to a good groom and He could experience it.

The initiative he took to take the first step certainly gave him the moments of his life.

He got very much emotional. Radha observed it.

He went to Radha and thanked her for giving him one more opportunity by which he could experience the moments of life.

Radha too got emotional and she replied, Your first step to improve the relationship made me think another time.

Radha also said, If your initiation of taking the first step was not there, this moment would have been a dream still.

By evening, the wedding celebrations had settled into a warm, happy tiredness.

Relatives were leaving with sweets and photographs. The flowers were beginning to droop, and the hall that had been full of voices throughout the day was slowly becoming quiet.

Vaasanthi and Sharat sat together in a small room, taking a few minutes for themselves before leaving.

Sharat looked at her and said, “So, Mrs. Sharat, how does it feel?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Please don't start calling me that every five minutes.”

“Every ten minutes, then?”

“Sharat!”

He laughed.

She looked at him, pretending to be stern, but her smile gave her away.

Then she grew thoughtful.

“Do you know what I liked most about today?”

“The food?”

“Obviously not.”

“The decorations?”

“No.”

“The handsome groom?”

She shook her head. “You are becoming impossible.”

“I am trying to discover the correct answer before my first day of marriage ends.”

She leaned back, smiling and said, “I liked seeing my parents together.”

Sharat's expression softened.

“I know.”

“For a long time, I thought that the damage done to our family was permanent. I thought the past had already made all the decisions for us.”

“And now?”

“Now I know that the past cannot be changed, but sometimes our response to it can.”

She paused.

“I cannot recover the childhood I missed with my father. But I can have conversations with him now. I cannot make my mother forget the years she spent hurting, but I can see her learning to live without allowing that hurt to decide everything. And I cannot promise that you and I will never misunderstand each other.”

Sharat nodded and said, “I would be worried if you promised that.”

She laughed softly.

“But I can promise you something,” she continued. “If our relationship matters to me, I will not allow my pride to become more important than an honest conversation. I will try to tell you what hurts me. I will try to understand you before deciding that you don't understand me.”

He took her hand and said, “And I will try to do the same.”

“Even when I am difficult?”

“Especially when you are difficult. Though I reserve the right to remind you that you are being difficult.”

She laughed again and said, “And I reserve the right to tell you when you are being foolish.”

“Fair enough.”

They sat quietly for a while.It was not an uncomfortable silence.

It was the silence of two people who did not need to fill every moment with words, because neither was using silence to punish the other. Vaasanthi rested her head briefly against his shoulder.

For someone who had spent years fearing the vulnerability of relationships, it was a simple gesture.

But simple gestures often marked the beginning of extraordinary things.

A few days later, Vaasanthi and Sharat returned to their new home.

The house was modest, bright, and filled with the promise of ordinary days. There were boxes waiting to be unpacked, curtains to be adjusted, kitchen shelves to be arranged, and a hundred little decisions to make.

Sharat stood in the living room, examining the empty wall opposite the entrance.

“We need something here,” he said.

“A clock?”

“We already have a clock.”

“A painting?”

“Possibly.”

“A photograph?”

“We have plenty of photographs.” Vaasanthi folded her arms.

“Then what do you suggest, Mr. Sharat?”

He grinned.

“I thought the newly appointed CEO of the editorial division might have some creative ideas.”

She gave him a mock glare.

“First of all, I am the CEO of the editorial division, not the CEO of everything. Second, I am on leave. Third, I refuse to make professional decisions about my living room.”

“Understood. I shall consult the appropriate authority.”

Before she could reply, the doorbell rang. Radha and Kishan stood outside, carrying a carefully wrapped package.

“What is that?” Vaasanthi asked.

“A wedding gift,” Kishan replied.

“You have already given us enough gifts.”

“This one is different,” Radha said. “And you are not allowed to refuse it.”

They brought the package inside and placed it against the wall. Sharat fetched a pair of scissors. Together, they removed the wrapping.

A painting emerged. It showed a simple pathway connecting two houses. Between them stood a small wooden bridge over a

narrow stream. On one side, a person stood waiting. On the other, another person looked towards the bridge.

Neither figure had yet crossed it. At the centre of the painting, the bridge was illuminated by the soft light of the rising sun. Below the image, in clear letters, were the words:



“No Silence Please... Do not hesitate to take initiative to improve bonds and relationships...”

Vaasanthi stared at the painting. For several seconds, she did not speak.

The words were familiar. They carried the weight of everything she had lived through, everything she had questioned, and everything she had finally come to understand.

She looked at her parents.

“Amma... Daddy...”

Radha stepped closer and said, “We wanted to give you something that would remind you of what this family has learned.”

Kishan continued gently.

“Not every relationship will be repaired. Not every person will respond to our efforts. We know that now. But we also know what it means to spend years wondering whether one honest conversation might have changed everything.”

Radha's eyes filled with tears.

“We cannot give you back the years you lost with your father. We cannot change the decisions we made when we were hurt and stubborn. But we can tell you what we wish we had understood then.”

She looked at her daughter.

“Do not let silence make decisions that your heart has not made.”

Vaasanthi's eyes overflowed.

Kishan touched the edge of the painting.

“If a bond matters to you, take the first step. Speak honestly. Apologise if you have made a mistake. Listen if the other person has something to say. Try to repair what can be repaired.”

He paused.

“But remember one more thing, child. You can open the door. You cannot force someone to walk through it.”

Sharat looked at Kishan with quiet respect.

“That is an important distinction.”

“Yes,” Kishan replied. “For years, I believed that waiting was the same as giving someone space. Sometimes it was. But sometimes, it was also my fear of being rejected. I cannot say that one more attempt would certainly have changed our lives. I can only say that I wish I had found the courage to try again.”

Radha lowered her eyes.

“And I wish I had found the courage to listen.”

Vaasanthi walked towards them and embraced them both. No one hurried to end the moment.

There were tears, but they were not tears of helplessness. They were the tears of people who had finally found words for a pain they had carried separately for too long.

After a while, Sharat gently lifted the painting.

“Where shall we put it?”

Vaasanthi wiped her eyes and looked at the wall opposite the entrance.

“Here.”

He positioned it while she guided him from a few steps away.

“A little to the left.”

He moved it.

“Now a little to the right.”

He moved it again.

“Perfect.”

The painting settled into its place.

Anyone entering the house would see it. Anyone leaving the house would see it too.

And every day, it would quietly remind them that relationships were not sustained by grand gestures alone.

They survived through small acts of courage: a phone call, an apology, a question asked without accusation, a visit made despite awkwardness, or a conversation begun before resentment had time to harden.

Radha looked at the painting.

“Now it feels complete.”

Vaasanthi turned towards her.

“No, Amma. The painting is complete. The work is never finished.”

Her mother smiled.

“True.”

“Relationships need attention even when everything seems fine. We should not wait until someone is ready to leave before we ask what is wrong.”

Kishan nodded.

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“And we should not assume that the other person will always make the first move.”

Sharat looked at Vaasanthi.

“Agreed. But we should also remember that a relationship cannot be carried by only one person.”

Vaasanthi met his eyes.

“Yes. We must try sincerely, but we must also allow the other person to make their choice. Taking the first step is an act of courage, not a promise to keep walking alone forever.”

For a moment, everyone was quiet. Then Radha smiled.

“Look at us. We have turned a wedding gift into a family meeting.”

Sharat laughed.

“I believe I married into a family that conducts editorial reviews even on Sundays.”

Vaasanthi laughed so freely that Kishan joined her, and Radha soon followed.

The room filled with the sound of a family that had once allowed silence to separate them.

Now, they were learning to fill their home with conversation.

Not every conversation would be easy. Not every disagreement would end in agreement. There would be misunderstandings, hurt feelings, tired evenings, and moments when someone would need time before speaking.

But they had learned something that would stay with them.

A pause could be healthy.

A silence used to punish, avoid, or protect one's pride could become a wall.

And a wall, left untouched for years, could eventually seem impossible to cross.

They had no intention of building that wall again.

Life moved forward.

Vaasanthi returned to work, where her responsibilities as CEO of the editorial division demanded more of her time and judgment. She continued to believe that good leadership began with listening, but she also learned to make difficult decisions without assuming that every disappointed person meant she had done something wrong.

She and Sharat discovered the everyday work of marriage.

They learned each other's habits. They disagreed over small things. They occasionally misunderstood what the other meant. Sometimes one of them needed to speak immediately, while the other needed a little time to find the right words.

But they returned to conversations.

They learned to say, “That hurt me,” instead of pretending nothing had happened.

They learned to ask, “What did you mean?” before deciding what the other person had intended.

They learned to apologise without treating an apology as a defeat.

And when one of them needed space, they learned to explain it rather than disappear into silence.

Their relationship was not perfect. It was something more realistic and, in its own way, more beautiful.

It was a relationship in which both people were willing to participate.

Radha and Kishan continued to rebuild their bond too. They met, spoke, remembered, and sometimes confronted the sadness of the years they had lost. Their past did not disappear, but it no longer dictated every conversation.

They did not become the couple they might have been fifteen years earlier.

They became two people who were trying to be kinder, more honest, and more present than they had been before.

And Vaasanthi, who had once believed that emotional distance was the safest way to live, discovered that the heart did not become weak when it cared.

It became wiser when it learned how to care without losing itself.

One evening, several months after the wedding, Vaasanthi returned home after a long day at work.

She placed her bag on the table and paused before the painting.

The pathway. The bridge. The two figures.

The words beneath them.

“No Silence Please... Do not hesitate to take initiative to improve bonds and relationships...”

She remembered the little girl she had once been, waiting for a father who did not come home.

She remembered the young woman who had decided she would never again depend on anyone emotionally.

She remembered the questions she had asked, the conversations she had feared, and the first steps that had

seemed so difficult when she had first taken them.

Most of all, she remembered the moment she had understood that her father was not simply a person from whom she had been separated.

He was a human being with his own regrets, his own fears, and his own unfinished sentences.

And her mother was not merely the person who had kept them apart.

She was a human being who had allowed pain to become a decision, and who had finally found the courage to reconsider it.

Understanding had not made every mistake acceptable. Forgiveness had not made the past disappear.

But both had made a different future possible.

Sharat came into the room and found her standing before the painting.

“Thinking about something?”

She smiled.

“Yes.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Not yet.”

He stood beside her.

“What is it?”

Vaasanthi looked at the words once more.

“I was thinking about how many relationships may have been lost because two people were waiting for the other to take the first step.”

Sharat nodded.

“And how many might have survived if one of them had tried.”

She turned towards him.

“But I was also thinking about something else. We cannot spend our whole lives wondering whether every broken relationship could have been saved. Sometimes we try, and the other person is not ready. Sometimes we try, and they choose not to return. Sometimes a relationship is no longer safe or healthy for us.”

“True,” Sharat said.

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“So perhaps the real question is not whether we can save every relationship.”

“What is it, then?”

“Whether we have been honest enough to try to save the ones that truly matter to us—without losing ourselves in the process.”

Sharat smiled and said, “I think that is a good question to live by.”

She leaned against him.

For a while, they stood together, looking at the painting.

Then Sharat asked, “Would you like some coffee?”

Vaasanthi smiled.

“Of course.”

“Should I make it?”

She looked at him with exaggerated surprise.

“You? Making coffee?”

“I am attempting to take the first step.”

She burst into laughter.

“Then I must encourage this initiative immediately.”

He walked towards the kitchen, and she followed him.

The painting remained on the wall, quietly watching them go.

It did not promise that every bond would survive.

It did not promise that every apology would be accepted, every friendship restored, or every estrangement healed.

It offered something more honest.

A reminder that a meaningful relationship deserves more than silent expectations. It deserves communication, humility, courage, and effort from both sides.

If you have hurt someone, take the initiative to apologise. If you have misunderstood someone, take the initiative to listen.

If a friendship has grown distant and still matters to you, take the initiative to reach out.

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If a relationship is struggling, take the initiative to begin an honest conversation.

Do not allow pride to make your decisions. Do not let fear write the final sentence of a relationship that still deserves a chance.

Try sincerely. Do what you reasonably can. Give the other person the opportunity to respond.

And if they do not, remember that you are responsible for the honesty of your effort, not for controlling another person's choice.

You do not have to spend the rest of your life carrying the question, *What if I had tried just once?*

Take the step that allows you to move forward without that regret.

Sometimes, it will bring someone back into your life. Sometimes, it will bring an apology. Sometimes, it will bring a new beginning.

And sometimes, it will bring the peace of knowing that you did not allow fear or pride to make the decision for you.

Vaasanthi had learned all of this through a journey she had never expected to take.

She had started by believing that the safest heart was the one that never reached out.

She ended by understanding that courage was not the absence of hurt, and strength was not the refusal to feel.

Sometimes, strength was picking up the phone.

Sometimes, it was saying, “I am sorry.”

Sometimes, it was saying, “Can we talk?”

Sometimes, it was listening to a truth that challenged everything you had believed.

And sometimes, it was extending your hand while accepting that the other person had the freedom to take it—or not.

Because a relationship is not saved by one person's effort alone.

But many relationships never receive the chance to be saved because neither person is willing to begin.

Vaasanthi had once been a daughter waiting for a father.

Then she had become a woman willing to ask the questions that fear had kept her from asking.

In the process, she had found her father again, helped her mother face the past, discovered a different way to lead, and chosen a partner who understood that love was not about changing her nature but learning to

understand it.

She had not repaired every broken thing in her life. She had done something more meaningful.

She had stopped allowing silence to decide what deserved a chance.

And perhaps that was the lesson her story had been waiting to tell.

Every bond will not last forever. Every relationship will not return. Every effort will not be rewarded.

But when a bond truly matters, do not let your pride, fear, or hesitation be the reason you never tried.

Take the first step.

Because sometimes, one small step is all it takes to begin a journey back to one another.

And sometimes, even when the other person does not return, that one step is what finally allows you to walk forward in peace.

The painting on Vaasanthi's wall carried a simple message.

A message born from years of separation, discovered through the courage to reconnect, and passed on as a promise for the years ahead.

No Silence Please...

Do not hesitate to take initiative to improve bonds and relationships.

For the relationships that matter, do not wait forever for the other person to begin.

Take the first step.

And let the rest be answered by the courage, honesty, and willingness of two hearts.

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Comments can be sent to : touchingwaves@gmail.com

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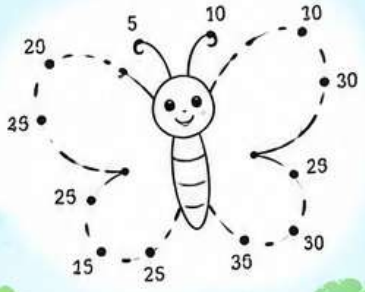
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Play • Think • Create • Grow

Coloring



Dot to Dot



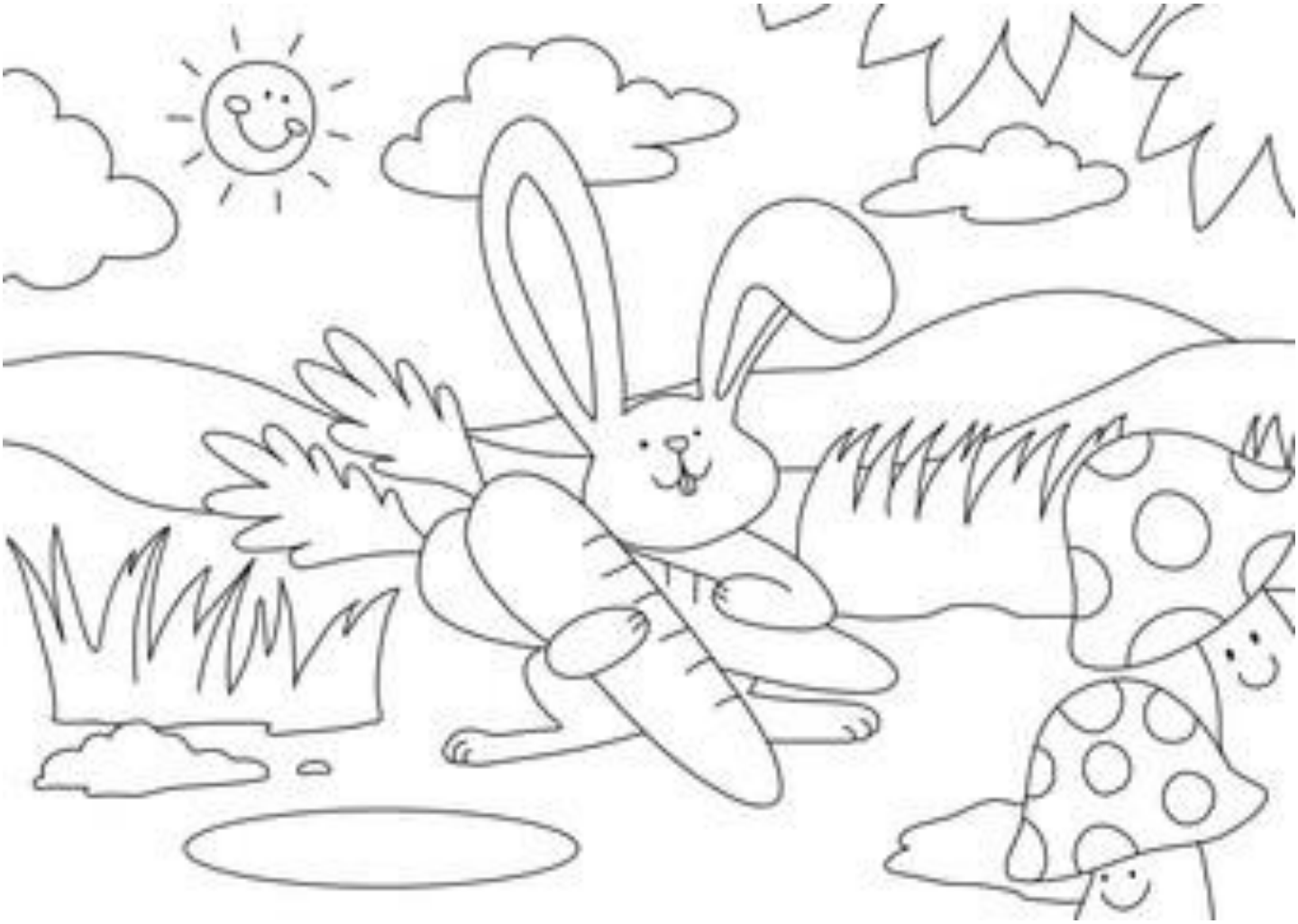
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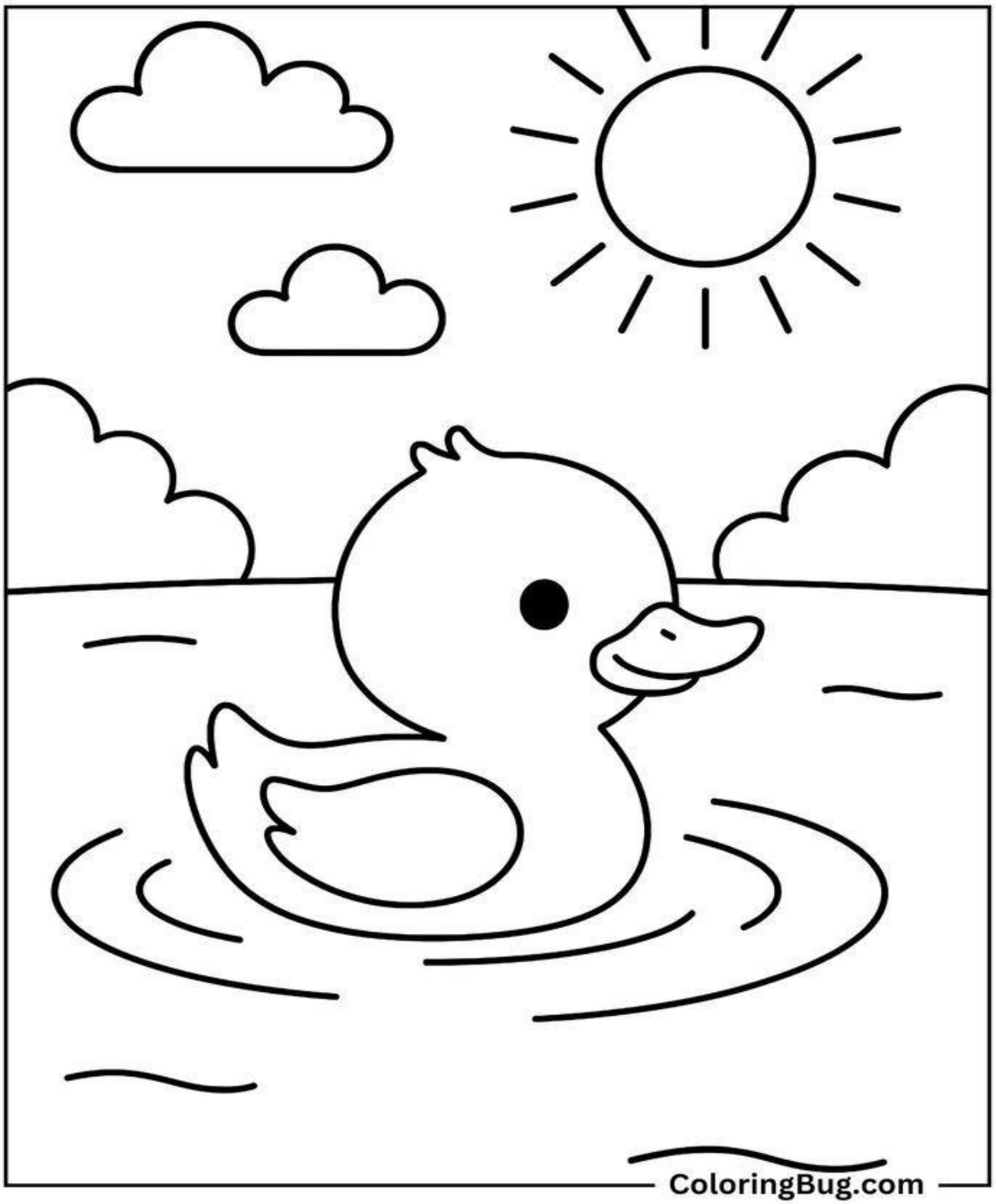




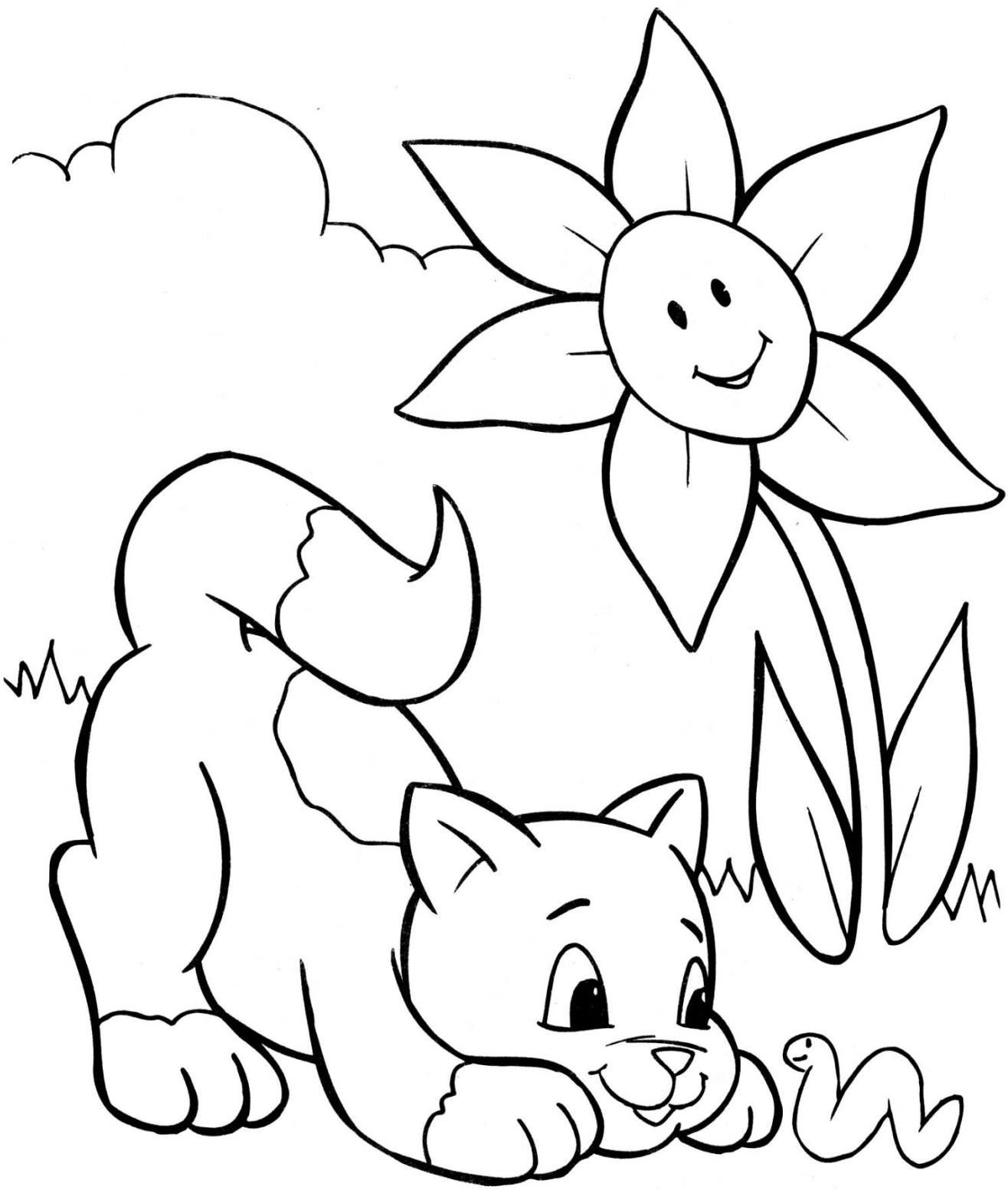
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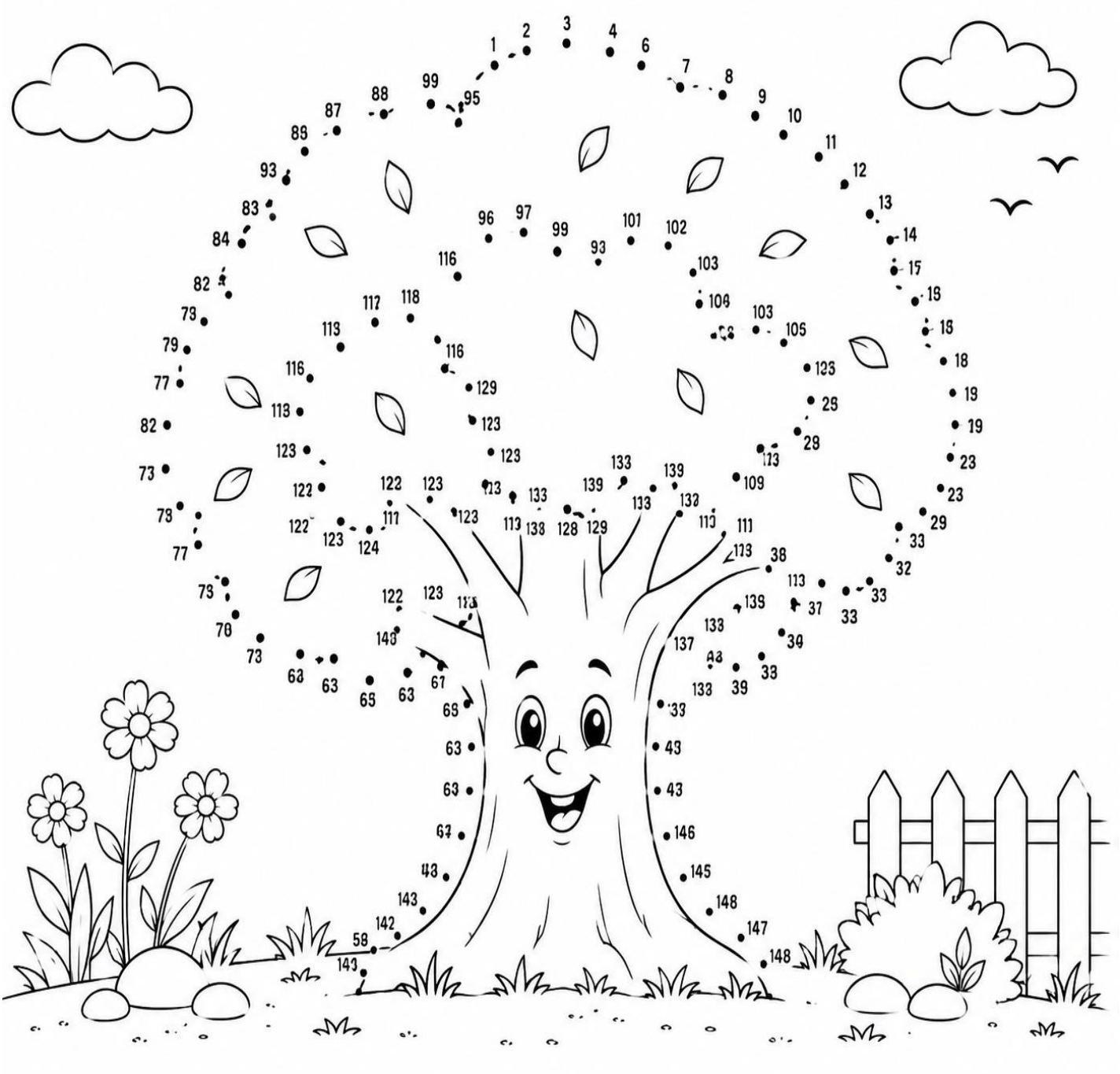



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COLOR ME



CONNECT THE DOTS TO GET WONDERFUL PICTURE



HELP THE CAMEL TO REACH TO WATER



BookWave

Children Zone

Fun Learn Grow



WORD SEARCH PUZZLE

Theme: Animal Kingdom



Find all the 25 hidden words in the grid.

The words can be hidden horizontally, vertically, diagonally, forwards or backwards.

U	D	A	C	X	Z	I	H	H	E	X	D	V	X	R	C	S	N	B	A
C	G	H	A	Q	E	P	E	A	C	O	C	K	T	A	R	G	W	U	R
W	R	N	M	H	B	O	S	E	L	A	H	W	I	Z	A	Y	Z	E	F
W	H	N	E	K	R	S	I	E	G	Y	K	D	C	M	D	L	T	L	T
I	E	Z	L	B	A	H	X	O	L	R	D	M	C	R	J	S	U	T	L
S	D	G	D	W	C	A	B	W	E	V	H	Y	J	C	M	H	D	P	M
I	G	E	O	U	L	R	O	F	F	L	L	E	G	A	V	I	W	E	V
U	E	C	T	E	U	K	F	F	R	X	L	H	H	F	O	Y	F	N	M
R	H	I	U	W	L	A	R	H	V	I	K	Y	Y	B	E	H	R	G	B
Z	O	K	M	I	R	T	C	G	D	S	W	K	G	K	U	P	O	U	M
U	G	O	E	I	X	I	R	O	E	H	X	R	N	R	I	X	G	I	T
L	S	N	G	S	O	M	C	U	L	H	E	O	Q	P	C	D	Y	N	O
K	E	B	D	E	F	O	U	F	T	Z	M	V	N	T	O	C	M	O	R
M	A	R	T	O	R	E	A	G	L	E	Q	I	R	L	A	V	D	C	R
X	A	N	R	C	D	V	R	Y	I	Y	U	K	P	D	J	O	N	T	A
F	O	D	G	I	A	X	X	I	Q	Y	F	H	Q	D	N	U	J	O	P
U	Q	T	N	A	U	G	E	L	Y	F	I	R	Y	K	Q	A	T	P	K
P	A	D	L	A	R	Q	Z	J	H	N	B	H	E	S	C	C	X	U	P
C	Y	R	Y	E	P	O	S	E	V	P	R	Y	F	I	Q	T	N	S	G
F	L	O	W	R	Y	X	O	W	G	W	J	M	V	U	L	O	Q	O	D

Find these 25 words

- [ ] CAMEL
- [ ] CROCODILE
- [ ] DEER
- [ ] DOLPHIN
- [ ] DONKEY
- [ ] EAGLE
- [ ] FOX
- [ ] FROG
- [ ] GIRAFFE
- [ ] HAMSTER
- [ ] HEDGEHOG
- [ ] KANGAROO
- [ ] MONKEY
- [ ] OCTOPUS
- [ ] OWL
- [ ] PANDA
- [ ] PARROT
- [ ] PEACOCK
- [ ] PENGUIN
- [ ] SHARK
- [ ] SQUIRREL
- [ ] TURTLE
- [ ] WHALE
- [ ] WOLF
- [ ] ZEBRA



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