

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

A couple of months after A Man from Mandu was published, I wanted to write an addendum. I had a few short stories in my mind and they wanted to be told by Dhawal. I decided to write a few pages on what happened to Dhawal and Tarini after the year of Avishkar Baba. While I had planned to make it a balanced tale, Tarini took over and the addendum is stilted from her point of view. I do not know if Addendums have a dedication but if they do, then I would like to dedicate this to myself, Manoj, a person I have grown to love deeply.

I must thank Shelina, Nandina and Dhruv for reading the un-edited rough draft of the story as I wrote it and gave me constructive criticism, feedback and encouragement. Most importantly, I would like to thank Seema Khanvilkar who graciously agreed to edit the addendum. I have no editor for these few pages as they are put up online, at no cost to the reader and Seema happily agree to proof the writings and clean up the errors. Thank you all

24 Nov 2019

## CHAPTER 1

Tarini sat on the wooden bench on her little patio admiring her first fall in the USA. The colours had changed so drastically and Tarini could not help but be overwhelmed by the oranges and reds and yellows of the leaves as they kept falling from the branches. She huddled herself in her blanket and smoked her cigarette in peace. The weather was turning cooler already and Tarini knew she needed to start hunting for fall jackets.

It would be her first winter in San Francisco and she was looking forward to it. At first, she was a bit nervous about how she would adjust to the cold, but all her colleagues at work had assured her that she would be fine as long as she equipped and layered herself well. She would ask Polly to meet her at the mall this weekend and guide her on what she would need.

She tucked her hair behind her ears and looked at her phone; saw the clock and got out of her musings. It was time to get ready and go to work.

Polly and her family had been extremely supportive when Tarini came to the USA. She stayed in their house for the first week, feeling conscious of being a burden although the family never gave her any cause to feel that way. She would help with the dishes and would spend time with the girls.

True to her word, Polly had got the job for Tarini through her husband Giri. While she attributed her charms of her dimpled pout to convince Giri, Paulomi knew that her husband was very fond of Tarini and he would have gone out of his way to help her. Tarini understood that it was a huge favour and she was grateful to Giri and Polly, so she had mentally decided that she would work hard, with focus and dedication so that Giri would not have to regret his decision. She wanted her contribution at work to be higher than the salary she drew, so she put in long hours, working from home late at night sometimes. She was always conscious of the enormity of what the couple had done for her and did not want to give any cause for complaint or be a source of embarrassment to them. More importantly, it helped her forget Dhawal and the past.

When Tarini joined the start-up, she was assigned a senior position; she made it a point to get close to her team members and work closely with them, often upgrading her skills by taking online courses.

Tarini quickly showered and had cereal for breakfast. She was not used to cooking and certainly not churning out elaborate meals. Polly has insisted that she dine with them on the weekends but Tarini knew that it was precious family time for them and went over only on the first weekend of every month. In fact, she decided to go to the mall that evening itself and by herself to buy a

few clothes for herself. Besides she also wanted to pick a nice Halloween gift for Jason. She called for her Uber to take her to work, not yet confident to drive in America.

She enjoyed her work, it was fun to be back in an office with colleagues and peers, the humdrum of the air conditioning, the sound of printers, the clicking of the computers, the jokes and the banter. For lunch she usually chose a sandwich and some yogurt. She would then take a cup of black coffee from the dispenser and stand outside with the others, enjoying a cigarette in the sun. In the evening, Tarini looked at the time and gave a small yelp; it was already six o'clock and most of the office had emptied already as it was a Friday evening. She packed her things and went outside to call her Uber to go to the mall as she had planned. *I will eat dinner there*, she thought to herself.

At the Shopping Centre, Tarini strolled absentmindedly in the aisles, looking at the window displays. She walked into a clothing store to buy herself a jacket and looked out for Halloween t-shirts for Polly's daughters. As she was walking by a men's store, a dark grey woollen scarf draped around the mannequin caught her attention. She knew Jason would like it and she went inside to buy it.

She felt good after her purchase; shopping therapy always made her feel cheery and she walked to the food court to get herself dinner. She went to the Chinese food counter that she had visited often before when she went with Polly or with Jason. As she stood in the line to select her food, she noticed two young girls in front of her. Tarini could not help but notice how youthful they were, their skins fresh and glowing. One of the girls saw her staring and smiled at her, and Tarini, just a little flustered smiled back at them. While eating her meal, Tarini looked at her hands and knew that she felt dowdy and grey especially when she saw excited younger women, full of energy and enthusiasm. She finished her meal quickly and left.

That night, as she lay in bed, she once again thought of the two girls in the mall and she sighed. Quickly she brushed away those thoughts and wondered why would it even bother her. She checked her phone and saw many unread WhatsApp messages. She scrolled through them, sending out inane emoticons whenever a reply was needed. Then she saw a message from Puneet, the man who had helped her with the logistics in the year that she was creating Avishkar Baba. She was not surprised for he sent her messages once in a while checking on her and asking if she had any news of his Guru. She would usually make a general comment and enquire about him. His answers were usually verbose and filled with a lot on Avishkar Baba and how his faith was so

powerful and honest that he was sure that his Guru would one day return to speak to him in person.

Tarini opened the message and it was a simple message. It said, Madam I hope you are doing well. We are all well. Please let me know if you have heard anything from Avishkarji.

Tarini decided that she would reply the next day. It would be the weekend and she could leisurely read the long replies that Puneet would doubtlessly send in response to her message. She turned around and switched off the bedside lamp and her mobile phone and gently fell asleep.

She found herself in Mandu in the same tea shop where she had stopped for tea and a toilet break with Polly when she had visited it. The driver was the same gentleman who had driven them and it was the same vehicle, but instead of Polly sitting next to her, she saw the two girls (who she had met in the mall that evening at the Chinese counter). They looked as young and beautiful as they had in the mall. As the car drove from away from the restaurant, one of the girls pointed out to a tree. "Look at that odd shaped tree", she said, "I have never seen something like it before, it looks like an upside-down tree with the roots upwards."

"That's a Baobab", said the other girl as Tarini peered at the tree; it was certainly an unusual tree and she did not remember noticing it from her earlier trip either.

"It's from Madagascar, the girl continued, "and found in parts of Africa. I wonder how it got here."

The driver turned and said "Madamji, long back a traveller from Africa gave these seeds to our king in Mandu when he visited this kingdom in exchange for food and shelter. The tree gives big fruits to us and we call it the *Imli* of Mandu."

"I want a selfie," said the first girl to Tarini. "Please, can we go to the tree."

So, they drove to the tree to click a picture and they found a man knitting a long scarf. Tarini smiled as she saw the man; it was Dhawal in his familiar purple shirt and he was furiously knitting away.

"Dhawal, what are you making?" she asked him and he looked up and smiled and said, "I am knitting a shawl for the tree."

The girls said, "let us all help you," and reached into their purses, pulling out knitting needles and balls of wool from their purse. They then sat under the Baobab tree near Dhawal and started knitting as well. Tarini opened her purse and pulled out the bottle of wine that she had on her table in Frisco and two glasses. "Tell us a story," she said to him, pouring herself a glass.

“Yes, please do, that is indeed a good idea” chimed the pretty girls, “It will make the knitting go faster.”

Tarini turned around and saw many people sitting around the tree, all knitting the same scarf. She spotted Puneet, Atul and Anil standing by her, their hands folded. Somehow Dhawal had metamorphosised into Avishkar Baba and he sat on a simple mat, his naked torso gleaming. The two pretty American girls continued knitting the scarf for the Baobab tree under which they sat.

“Once upon a time there was an old sailor who had travelled around the seven seas in his tiny little boat. He was so experienced that he could see the sky and feel the wind and predict if the weather was safe to navigate his boat. One evening, he noticed dark grey clouds in the sky so he rubbed his fingers and said to himself, it will be a nasty storm tonight so I better anchor my boat soon. He quickly steered his boat till he came upon a cluster of rocks. He reached one of the rocks that stood a little apart from the others.

What a beautiful rock this is, he said aloud, looping the rope of his boat around it, I am lucky to have found it.

The experienced sailor heard a deep sigh and he turned around to see who had made the sound. “I was beautiful once upon a time,” said the rock sadly, “but I am old now.”

“I think you look very nice now,” said the sailor. “I admire your strong body which has given support to my boat and many others before me.”

“You should have seen me when I was young. I was closer to my family and connected to them but over years the sea has kept beating against me and slowly we have all distanced ourselves.”

“But you are yet so close,” said the sailor. “And very beautiful, if I may add.”

“If you want to see true beauty then you can see a little side of me to your right. You will find a small part which has not been exposed to the waves and you will see how chiselled and shiny I was once upon a time.”

The sailor looked and indeed found the shiny side of the rock He hugged the rock and said, “can anyone of us fight against the constant beating of the sea? It will always shape us and erode us and develop us slowly into new shapes and sizes. But that does not make us less beautiful. In fact, your sharp edges have been smoothly finished and your softened surface glows in the reflection. One is beautiful at every stage.”

“I am old now,” said the rock, “and slowly the sea will swallow me as it has swallowed all the others.”

“But you have been useful to all of us, my friend”, said the sailor caressing the rock, “and you will continue helping all. Don’t worry about the sea for it is a force that none of us can control.”

That night the sailor rested in deep slumber; his boat securely moored to his newly found old friend.

And Tarini saw the open land rippling and becoming into an ocean, the baobab tree floating like a log with Dhawal sitting on it and sailing away.

Tarini's alarm went off and she got up with a start. The dream had felt so real. She peered at her phone to see the time and went back under her sheets.

## CHAPTER 2

Tarini sat up in bed, a bit confused. She had willfully blocked Dhawal in her waking days and it was disturbing to see him surface in her dreams. Reluctantly she got out of bed, wrapping her blanket around her and went to the patio for an untimely smoke. She sat there puzzled, resisting the urge to call Puneet. Ultimately, she gave in and dialed India to speak to the man who helped with the logistics when she was promoting Avishkar Baba. She knew that Puneet was yet a believer and follower of the Baba.

Puneet answered the phone immediately and she could hear the eagerness in his voice.

“Hello madam, how are you doing?”

“I am fine, Puneet. You had sent a message yesterday so I decided to call you. I hope everything is well with you and your family.”

“By the grace of Guruji, the boys are doing well. After my family met him and took his blessings, the boys have been studying harder.”

“I am happy to hear that Puneet.”

“Madamji, do you know when Avishkar Baba will be returning to Mumbai. I have a great desire to meet him. If only I could get his blessings once, I will be able to carry on for another year.”

Tarini paused and let out a sigh. “Puneet, he will not be coming back. He has gone for good.”

“Madamji please do not say that. You also know he will be back. He told us so himself in his sermons.”

“When did he say that he would be back?” asked Tarini curiously. She could not remember him mentioning such a thing in any of his stories.

“Do you not remember the sermon he gave on the man who was tied with the chords and tried to cut them? He narrated that story to tell us that he would come back. I know he will; I feel it in every cell of my body.”

Tarini pondered and tried to recollect the evening when Dhawal had narrated the story and she could not see how Puneet had reached the conclusion that Avishkar Baba would return based on that speech; however she knew that everyone drew different lessons from what they heard.

“Madamji, are you on the line yet?”

“Yes, yes Puneet, sorry, I was thinking of something else.”

“You must be very busy in America. But, when you speak to Avishkar Baba next, send him my *pranaams*.”

“Okay Puneet, I definitely will,” said Tarini, not wishing to clarify that she had no clue about the whereabouts of the missing Baba.

She shut the phone and lit another cigarette and started to reminisce on the story that Puneet had mentioned.

It had been a humid Mumbai evening and Avishkar Baba had sat with a motley audience as he spoke. Tarini could imagine his naked torso as he sat and could not resist the ripple that flowed within her with the memory. He had looked at the audience with the same intensity and had spoken softly with compassion.

It was a strange land that Moh was born in, Avishkar Baba had said. When a person is born, the umbilical cord is cut and the baby is placed next to his mother. However, in this strange land, within seconds, another cord, thin and nearly transparent like that of a spider's web would appear from the child's back and connect itself to the mother's back. Soon many more cords would appear as the child grew, some fine as gossamer and others thicker, making a myriad of connections. The people of that country had a word for it- they called these fibres the Roos. The chords from all the people would go from their backs upwards and join in to the mesh of chords connecting one to the other. It was a grid of fine nearly invisible threads that allowed the sunlight to come through.

The people of that land were comfortable with these fibres for they were long and flexible and did not interfere with their daily life. Their clothes accommodated for the Roos and since they had been born with them, they managed to move around without any hindrance or discomfort. The threads themselves would elongate and stretch to enable easy movement.

Moh grew up in a loving family, secure and happy. It was when he went to university that he first got a sense of discomfort with the cords emanating from his back. The first time he noticed it was when he had planned to miss his classes and go out to his favourite spot near the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea; he had wanted to sit there and smoke a cigarette during school hours but when he actually left the gates of his college he felt a very tiny tug at his back. It was just a little pin prick that lasted a couple of seconds barely discernible; it could just have been an insect bite, but Moh felt it distinctly and it left an uncomfortable feeling within him. He decided to ignore it this time but over the next few months he began to notice this phenomenon repeat itself.

He was in his final year at University now and he decided to speak to his inseparable friend, Shu about it and find out if he too felt the tugs and pricks occasionally.

"Shu," he said, "do the cords at the back of your body trouble you sometimes?"

“No, they don’t,” said Shu, “why do you ask? Are the Roos bothering you? Maybe you can visit the physician and have it checked.”

“I sometimes feel them tugging at me. It’s very light and it’s just for a split second but I do feel it.”

“Does it hurt?” Asked Shu with concern.

“Not really hurt,” replied Moh, “it feels like a quick passing pin prick, something that I may not even realise.”

“Then why does it bother you?”

“I feel it is a loss of my free will and freedom. I do not like to think that we cannot act on the basis of our own decision but that we are in actuality, controlled by an umbrella of cords above us.”

“Moh, I think you are making too much of this. I do not understand how the tug is against your free will? What is it that you wish to do that the Roos are not allowing you to do?”

Shu saw his friend go red in the face. Moh spluttered and said, “never mind Shu. It’s not important.”

The uneasiness of the Roos controlling him kept playing in Moh’s mind. This feeling finally reached a crescendo during the university graduation ceremony. The entire batch stood in the auditorium wearing their black robes and graduation caps eager to throw them in the air, as was customary. During the ceremony, there was a graduation speech by a famous statesman who gave a jingoistic speech on what patriotism was and how they, the future, were expected to be the moral torch bearers for the country. Moh decided that he did not want to stay and listen and decided to walk out. He planned to slip out and go to his favourite spot on the cliff and celebrate this landmark graduation by himself but when he attempted to leave, the Roos held him stiffly in place not allowing his legs to move. Moh stood there during the ceremony horrified and in stupor, forgetting to go to collect his certificate when his name was called until his neighbour pushed him out of his self-absorption.

That night and the night after Moh could not sleep. He finally decided that he was not going to live his life controlled by the Roos. He knew there was no escape from the land and so he would have to take action given his circumstances.

The following night when everyone in the house was sleep, Moh crept into the garden shed and drew out a large pair of shears from the tool cupboard. He stood with his back against the wall so all the fibres of the Roos were bunched together upwards; he reached above his head to gather them in his fist and unhesitatingly cut the Roos with the shears, in an act fraught with rebellion. He was a bit disappointed that he felt no physical change, no sense of liberation. He went back to bed that night sleeping peacefully after days.

When he awoke the next morning, he checked if the Roos had grown back and was relieved to see that his back was unconnected. He walked outside, a free man for the first time in his life, humming to himself. He noticed that no one would have anything to do with him; he was no longer part of the system. At first, he didn't seem to mind but slowly he felt strange and unconnected. He decided to go where the outcastes live. I will live freely with them he thought but when he went there, he found that they too were connected and bound by the Roos. He returned back to the city and tried to mingle with the people. To his dismay, with every conversation, with each interaction and transaction, he noticed the cords from his back start to grow again and affix with the mesh above.

He reached home frustrated and full of despair. "Am I not allowed to live my life by my own rules," he cried. "Even the outcastes are governed by the Roos. I refuse to live like this," he ranted to the empty room. "I would rather die than live a life of a slave." That evening he decided to go to his favourite spot on the cliff. I will cut all the cords there, he thought to himself and will leap to my death into the cold and grey sea below.

He reached his favourite spot, carrying the garden shears in a bag. He sat on his bench on the cliff and held the newly formed fibres as he had done earlier and cut them swiftly with the shears. It is time to jump now, he thought and I do this for my freedom. He rose slowly and stood on the edge but as he was preparing to take the leap, he felt a light tug on his back. He paused, wondering what held him back. He sat on the bench once again and noticed a single thread, fine as gossamer that yet tied him to the mesh above. He realised that he did not have the freedom to jump either; there would always be threads and more threads. With a sigh, he slowly rose and walked home, accepting the Roos for what they were and deciding to live within the system.

### **REPEATED**

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### CHAPTER 3

Dhawal sat in the train, looking out of the window. It was November end and the weather had turned cold, and it was biting in the moving train. He sat cross-legged on his berth, wearing a sleeveless ribbed red sweater over his shirt to keep himself warm. It was cold and the mist had settled on the dry barren countryside. The train whooshed past little villages, the people wrapped in their shawls, squatting around a fire made with twigs and dried woods.

Dhawal glanced at the man who sat facing him. The man must have been just a few years older than Dhawal but he looked elderly. His face looked gaunt, his hair was thinning with streaks of white; shoulders drooping he looked like a man defeated and resigned to his unhappiness. Every now and then, he would glance at his phone and then slip it back in his pocket.

Dhawal reached out for the little samosas wrapped in a newspaper, that he had picked up at the station, and opened it carefully. He stretched out his arms and offered them to the older man. "Please take a samosa," he said smiling kindly.

The old man just nodded his head and Dhawal continued, "I do not like to eat alone. Please have one with me. They are fresh samosas."

The old man looked at the packet and listlessly picked up one. As they munched the snack, the man once again pulled out his phone and checked it. "Are you expecting an urgent call?" Dhawal asked.

"No," said the gentleman letting out a deep sigh. "I do not know why I keep checking my phone in case my children have messaged me."

"Aah," said Dhawal gently, "do they live far away?"

The stranger's face brightened up as he spoke of his children. "I have two sons," he said, "one lives in Bangalore and the other in Nasik. I also have a daughter and she is in Delhi."

He looked crestfallen and he continued, "they never seem to have the time to call or message me. They are so busy," he said justifying their actions.

"That reminds me of a story," said Dhawal. "Let me tell it to you as it will help us cut this journey."

The old man looked at Dhawal and nodded.

"Once there was a man Yoba who was crossing a desert," said Dhawal. "The journey was hard and difficult and he depended on reaching an oasis every other day so he could refresh himself and fill his water storage. The days were hot, the sun glaring over the dunes of sand that he crossed. His skin was parched and his clothes worn out as he travelled across the landscape. He had

left his last oasis two days ago and was now weary and tired, looking out for the next rest stop. He looked far ahead and he could see it in the distance. I will reach it in a couple of hours, he reckoned and with renewed vigour walked towards it. As the evening sun began its descent, he reached the shelter and gratefully muttered a small prayer of thanks. He washed himself in the cool water and filled his cask with it too. I will rest here for a few days, he thought to himself, as he set up his tent for the night.

The next morning, as he awoke, he went to refresh himself and saw an old man sitting near the water. Yoba, the traveller, walked towards him and greeted him; it was nice to have company for a couple of days in his arduous journey.

“Have you been travelling for a long time?” he asked, trying to start a conversation. The old man turned his head slowly to look at him and smiled gently.

“Yes, my son,” he said, “I have been travelling a long time. I reckon longer than you have,” he said, stroking his white beard.

Yoba smiled and said, “It is so nice to be in an oasis. It makes the journey possible. Frankly, it even makes the wandering in the harsh desert worthwhile to be able to sit in the cool shade and have sufficient water.”

The old man stared intently at the traveller and opened his mouth and then shut it again, as if he was going to say something but had decided against it. Yoba felt a bit uncomfortable at the withdrawal by the old man and his strong gaze and so averted his eyes. He softly said, “you were about to tell me something but held back. What is it?”

The old man sighed and kept silent. He then rose and said, “you are yet young and have a long journey ahead of you yet.”

“What has my age got to do with it,” said Yoba, a touch of indignation entering his voice

Yoba realised he was being disrespectful and continued, “please Sir, tell me what you were going to say. I respect your experience. I agree I have a long travel journey ahead but I will benefit from your words and they will be useful to guide me.”

The old man looked at Yoba again and then turned and walked to the water front. He put his hands in and cupped a little and washed his face with it. Slowly he walked back to Yoba and said, “since you insist, I will tell you but I hope it will not make the rest of your travels difficult. My words come from knowledge garnered over the years and they will not affect you in your journey if you decide not to.”

Yoba nodded in anticipation and waited, anxious to hear what the old man would tell him.

“There are no oases,” said the old man simply, “that is all I want to tell you.”

“What,” cried Yoba in surprise for this was not what he expected to hear.

“The oasis is just a mirage,” continued the old man, patiently, ignoring Yoba’s reaction.

“But we are in an oasis,” said Yoba, wondering if the old man had lost his senses. It was not improbable when one is crossing the desert, he thought to himself. The loneliness, the heat, the lack of necessities and the absence of comfort can all do that to anyone. He then explained himself cautiously and in small sentences as if talking to a man with limited intelligence and yet maintaining respect for his age. “Sir, we are in an oasis. I have been in many other ones earlier too. That is the only way that we can cross this terrain”

The old man smiled in amusement. “Those are mirages,” he insisted.

“Then please can you explain how I would get refreshed at each stop? And is the water that I drank a mirage too?”

“Yes, my son” said the old man gently, “it all does not exist. Or rather it exists only in your mind. You feel refreshed and cool because your mind fools you. Your body reacts to the mind. It is the same heat but yet your skin feels less dry.”

In utter disbelief, yet puzzled because of the certitude of the old man, he said, “let me try it out. You say the water and this entire oasis is a mirage; let me believe you and tell my mind not to fool me. I will then go to the water and splash some on my face while believing it does not exist. And you say, I will be actually washing my face with sand?”

Then Yoba closed his eyes and said to himself that this does not exist and I will see it for what it is. He opened his eyes slowly and let out a sharp yelp for in front of him was the endless desert.

“What sorcery is this,” he shouted.

“It is no magic,” said the old man calmly.

“How will I cross the desert knowing there are no sojourns?”

“You will have to tell your mind to forget reality and create a mirage.”

“How is that even possible?” said Yoba, “I can’t unlearn what I heard from you. I cannot delude myself now that I know the truth.”

The old man chuckled and said, “yes, you can. That is the only way we cross a desert. We make up imaginary oases as we go along. Your mind will create and believe in the next mirage when you need it and your body will happily cooperate too. So, close your eyes again my son, and believe in the mirage where we met.”

“Why will we ever be in the desert when we can always be in a mirage?” asked Yoba earnestly.

The old man sighed. His eyes were full of suffering and his body hunched as if it had aged all of a sudden. Wearily he said, “the choice is ours, whether we wish to live in the harsh reality of the desert or the comfort of an oasis. You can live wherever but remember the choice is yours.”

Yoba closed his eyes and believed in the oasis and opened his eyes. Not expecting it, he was surprised to see the oasis as he had imagined it. He felt a rush of adrenaline and quickly rushed to the water in front of him to splash his face with the cool waters.”

With that Dhawal ended his story and said, “it’s time to go to bed now. I am sorry I have kept you awake with a long boring story but maybe it took your mind off from the phone.”

His co- traveller kept sitting still, as if absorbing the story, lost in his thoughts while Dhawal got up and began adjusting the bedding on his berth.

Dhawal lay on his bed, thinking of Yoba and the desert and the oasis. He then sat up and pulled out his mobile phone and switched it on. He opened the WhatsApp on his phone and searched for the contact on his phone that said Tarini. Wistfully, he clicked on the picture and saw an image of Tarini defiantly staring at him. He started to type a message, then deleted it and retyped it and with a smile sent her the message.

## CHAPTER 4

Dhawal awoke early the next morning and stretched himself on his berth. It was cold and his body let out a shiver. He pulled out his phone to see if there was any message from Tarini but there was none. The message had been delivered but was unread till now. He was not dejected; in fact, he had not expected a reply. He looked at his co-passenger and found him sitting, staring at him “You sleep so soundly,” he said to Dhawal, “I was waiting for you to wake up”

“Good morning,” mumbled Dhawal and sat up. “Did you sleep well?”

“I have been thinking about the story you told me last night and have not slept much,” said the man smiling a little.

“Let me go to the toilet and freshen up,” said Dhawal, “and let me get you a cup of chai and biscuits too.”

When Dhawal came back to the compartment, he saw two cups of chai and a packet of biscuits. “The chai seller came when you were gone so I got some for both of us,” said the man genially.

Dhawal was surprised to see the man more relaxed than he had been the previous day.

“Let me pay you for the chai,” he volunteered.

“Did I offer you money for the samosas last night?” replied the man.

Dhawal smiled and they sipped their chai, dunking the sweet biscuits and slurping the hot tea as the train chugged along

“I have been thinking of the story you told me last night,” the man repeated, “and I decided that I choose the oasis instead of the dessert.”

“I am happy that you have made a choice,” said Dhawal, blowing his tea to cool it down before the next sip.

“But how does one stay in the oasis is the question,” said the elderly gentleman.

Dhawal smiled a beatific smile and said, “let me tell you the tale of Gara. It’s a short story and we have very little time, for my station shall soon be here, so let me narrate it quickly.”

“Gara led a relatively nondescript life; he lived alone in the city, in a rented apartment, in a small building. His life was a well-set routine; he woke up and did thirty minutes of exercise, fixed himself the same breakfast day after day of buttered toast and jam and a cup of coffee and rushed to work at eight in the morning sharp. At office, his job was fairly monotonous and he sat in front of the computer, taking his coffee breaks and lunch break in the canteen in the office building. He came back at seven in the evening and went to the healthy food diner close by for a light meal. He returned and watched television serials before he called it a day.

At the beginning of the month, usually on a Sunday, his landlord would come for the rent and Gara was prompt with his payment. The landlord lived in the same building and he knew Gara’s daily schedule so he would plan his visit accordingly. It was a monthly ritual; the landlord would come on the first Sunday of every month, they would sit together and exchange pleasantries over a cup of coffee and then Gara would say, “isn’t it time for the rental?”. The landlord would nod and say “oh yes, it is” and Gara would give him the cheque that had already been pre-written. It was a set routine and each time they played the same roles with the landlord acting surprised that it was rental time already.

It was the first Sunday of the month and the landlord rang the doorbell. Gara opened the door and listlessly said, “hello, please come in.” The landlord sat and waited for his coffee as per the normal role playing but this time, he saw Gara looking vacant, staring out of the window.

“Is everything ok with you?” he asked Gara. “You don’t look too well.”

Gara looked at the landlord and said, “No, it isn’t. I have been worried about something.” His voice was hoarse and the landlord looked worried. “What is it?” he asked gingerly.

“I think I am becoming invisible,” said Gara woodenly.

“Ha ha,” laughed the landlord in relief. “You are certainly not getting invisible for I can see you clearly as daylight. You may be a bit overworked and so your mind is playing these tricks. Why don’t you take a small vacation?” I better be careful, thought the landlord, as this tenant seems a bit unhinged. Invisible he says, he needs to visit a doctor!

Gara shook his head and persisted, "it's true. Very often when I go to work people look through me. Last night for instance, when I went to the cafe for my dinner, they could not take my order for they could not see me."

The landlord shrugged and said, "I don't know what you are talking about for I see you clearly. In fact, I see you every morning as you leave the building at eight in the morning and when you return from work as well."

"It has happened occasionally when I am alone as well," continued Gara, as if the landlord had not interjected. "Sometimes when I make a sudden turn, I cannot see my arm for a split second."

"You need to visit a doctor," said the landlord gingerly. He knew he would not get his coffee this morning as per the pattern. He decided to ask for the rental directly. "I also wanted to remind you that it is the start of the month and the rent will be due. Don't worry," he added hastily "I can come back later this afternoon if you need time to write the cheque."

Gara shook himself from his reverie and looked at the landlord. "Aah! I forgot to tell you that I will be moving out as I am shifting to another apartment closer to the office. I shall move out in a day. I am sorry I did not have time to inform you earlier as it happened very quickly and I was pre-occupied with my ailment."

The landlord looked at Gara and was surprised to see him fade into the air

"I will of course pay you for fifteen days for the notice period as per the agreement," continued Gara

"Who said that?" said the landlord looking around and Gara knew that he had become invisible to the landlord too.

"So that was the story of Gara, the man who turned invisible," said Dhawal springing up and pulling out his bag. "My station will soon arrive coming and I will go and wait near the door."

The elderly co-passenger also unfolded his legs and stood up  
"Who are you?" he asked.

“Oops! I forgot to introduce myself and we have been chatting like lost friends. My name is Dhawal”

“No, I mean, who are you? I don’t care if your name is Dhawal,” the man repeated and reached out to embrace Dhawal.

Dhawal hugged the man tightly and said, “I am just a traveller, like you are. Now remember to not be invisible for your children.”

The old man looked at Dhawal once again, his eyes shining with unshed tears. “Thank you,” he said, “I will always remember your parables.”

He bent down to touch Dhawal’s feet but Dhawal stopped him.

“Hug me again, my friend, for it is time for me to now go; I think the train just pulled in to my destination.”

## CHAPTER 5

Tarini was enjoying the party; she knew a lot of the guests and she was feeling good. Jason was with her and they were bowling using pumpkins as bowling balls to knock the water bottle pins in Paulomi's garden. Giri had hosted the annual Thanksgiving party at his house this year and there were many colleagues and friends from the office there too. Paulomi was a perfect hostess; she had skipped turkey for dinner this year and had got a caterer who had put out an eclectic Mediterranean cuisine spread instead.

There was a photo booth in a corner; Jason and Tarini dragged the hosts with them and got photos of the four of them making mad faces. Jason was very comfortable with Paulomi and Giri as well as some of the colleagues, as he had gone out with them a few times in the last few months.

Then Giri announced that all the guests should get their drinks and gather under the tree in the garden. Tarini got a cider and pumpkin martini for herself and Jason and stepped into the garden.

There was a tree which was lit up and had little notes hanging from the branches. Giri stood under it, cleared his throat and started his Thanksgiving speech as was customary. He thanked his wife and family, friends, clients and his colleagues at work. Lastly, he gave special thanks to Tarini for joining them and everyone cheered. Tarini found her eyes misting up and Jason hugged her. Then, one by one people pulled out a note each from the branches and read them- they were all thank you quotes, some funny, others wry or witty.

Tarini pulled out her phone to take a picture of the setting- she was not a person who clicked too many photographs but it was a beautiful scene in the garden and she was overwhelmed. She noticed there was an unread WhatsApp message on her cell phone from an unknown number - she seemed to have missed it in the morning. Out of habit, she clicked on it and read it; it was a simple message saying *Tarini I miss you. I don't where you may be now but I would like to meet you again. Can we meet 29 December on the banks of the Narmada in Mandu.* Tarini opened the display picture to see Dhawal's face and she reeled against Jason.

"Have you had too much to drink?" asked Jason jokingly.

Tarini gave a weak smile and said "I need to go to the toilet"

She went inside and locked herself in the powder room. She sat on the pot and re-read the message.

She found her hands trembling against her wishes. *What does he think of himself?* she thought to herself. *That we can be in touch at his whims and fancy.* She re-read the message for a third time. *Does he know that I am working in the USA now and Mandu is not exactly in my backyard?*

She knew her anger was a defence; she was upset with herself for feeling the warm glow at the words in the message which said *Tarini I miss you.* Her head was buzzing and Tarini thought *maybe I have drunk too many martinis* but she knew it was the message and not the drinks that had hit her.

*I have been through too much and am now well settled here,* she thought, *I cannot go through the pain again. I have closed that chapter of my life and now do not wish to re-open it.* She heaved herself up and looked at herself in the mirror and smiled at her reflection. *I will not reply to the message,* she thought and opened the door and went back into the garden.

She stood quietly, sipping water.

“Are you feeling alright? Is everything okay?” Tarini turned and saw Paulomi standing behind her.

“Yes,” stammered Tarini, a bit flustered, “I’m ok.”

“Where’s your drink?” Paulomi enquired.

“I guess I needed to hydrate my system in between drinks.”

Paulomi’s eyes narrowed and shrewdly she said, “Tarini. Tell me what’s happened. You were enjoying yourself and suddenly you’ve grown quiet. Your face has lost all colour.”

Tarini gave a weak smile and said, “it’s all fine Polly. You carry on.”

Paulomi gave her a quizzical look and left her, worry lines on her forehead but she had lots to handle as the hostess, and so she busied herself. Tarini spent the rest of the evening with Jason but was clearly a shadow of what she had been earlier in the evening.

As Jason drove them to her house, he said that it was a great party. As part of the conversation he asked her gently, “you became very quiet somewhere during the dinner.”

Tarini kept quiet and Jason did not pursue the topic. He figured that she would tell him when she needed to.

They went inside; Jason was staying over that night. They had met in a yoga class a couple of months after Tarini had shifted to the United States. He was a few years older than her, divorced years ago. Tarini and he were a couple who stayed together occasionally, committed but preferring to live in their own houses. On alternate weekends he stayed over; they went as the plus one for any events they were invited for, but they maintained their status as dating. Tarini found Jason very understanding and while he was interested in Tarini's life, he was not intrusive. She, on the other hand, did ask him many questions on his failed marriage, on his wife and on his relationship with his two children, information that he shared with her quite matter-of-factly.

The following morning as she sat on her patio smoking, Jason came with his coffee to sit with her. She looked at him, surprised, a question on her forehead, for she knew he did not like being around cigarette smoke.

"I thought I'd join you this morning. Brrr! It's cold."

"Get a blanket too," she said. "You're in your boxers and you'll catch a cold."

He went in and came back wrapped in a throw. He sat next to her and held her hand. "What or Who is Dhawal?" he asked gently. Tarini turned sharply to look at him but his face was calm. She wondered if he had checked her phone but decided against that thought. She knew he was a gentleman and besides both of them were too old and relatively uncommitted to be checking each other's messages. Instead of answering him, she asked him a counter question, "why do you ask?"

Passively he explained, "last night you were mumbling in your sleep and you said the word Dhawal a couple of times. Would you like to speak about it?"

Tarini kept silent, inhaling on her cigarette and tucking her hair behind her ears. She exhaled deeply and finally said softly, "Dhawal was a brief encounter from the past. Our meeting was on a tangent, only for us to go on our own paths."

Jason said, "Yesterday you completely switched off midway in the party. Was Dhawal connected to that too?"

Tarini was surprised at Jason's perceptiveness. Normally she would consider this as an intrusion but she knew he was asking more of concern rather than from jealousy or curiosity. She knew she had not been herself since she read Dhawal's message.

"I'll tell you about it sometime," she mumbled and the topic was closed.

That weekend, Paulomi and Tarini went to the shops for Tarini to get her first experience of Black Friday. Paulomi could sense that Tarini was a little pensive but she decided not to pry. The shops were overcrowded and Tarini said, "Thanks for getting me to see what the big sales are about. But there are too many people and I don't need to buy anything specific. Let's go to a quiet place where we can grab a coffee."

"Let me drive us to the Mill. I love the coffee there and we can sit and catch up. I could not spend time individually with you at the Thanksgiving party as there were so many people there."

"It was truly a wonderful dinner," said Tarini. Jason and I had a great time.

"I saw you enjoying yourself," said Paulomi at least in the beginning and she trailed off, not wanting to sound as if she was prying.

"I got a message from Dhawal," said Tarini flatly. She had not planned to discuss it with Paulomi but the words just came out and she felt a sense of comfort being able to speak about it to someone.

"And?" said Paulomi, curious now but not knowing what to say.

"It was so sudden. At the party, I got my cell phone out to click a picture and there was a message that I had not seen. It was an unknown number. It took me by surprise. This is the first time that I have heard from him after his last sermon"

"And what did he say?"

"He says he misses me and that he would like to meet. He's given a date too and says we can meet in Mandu on the banks of the river."

Paulomi was silent. Finally, she asked, very gently, "Did you reply to him?"

"No, I did not. I have nothing to say. I obviously will not be going."

They reached the coffee shop and placed their orders. Once they sat down in a cosy spot, Paulomi said, "Would you like to meet him again? Maybe closure is a good thing."

"We have nothing to close, Polly. Everything was already closed when he left."

"He says he misses you. What do you feel now?"

“I am happy here. I love my job; I have a nice relationship with Jason. I cannot just quit everything now on just a message. I went through hell when he left. I have nothing to say or hear.”

Paulomi saw Tarini twist her napkin absent-mindedly and knew that Tarini was possibly protecting herself. She asked, “You can take a week’s leave. You have been working hard; I am sure the company will understand. You can meet your mother and brother too. That is, if you want to go. I can speak to Giri about giving you a few days off.”

“No, Polly. I can speak to Giri myself. It’s not fair to make you ask him. But that is secondary. The question is whether I want to go at all.”

“Tarini, that is a question that only you can answer. But be honest to yourself before you reply to him. And also speak to Jason.”

That night Tarini sat and thought hard. She sat on the patio, smoking and toying with the box of cigarettes to give her hands something to do. She knew she was fooling herself and she was actually sure she wanted to go to meet Dhawal. She decided to speak to Jason about it and ask Giri for leave before she replied to Dhawal.

The following week, she booked her ticket to Mumbai and onwards to Mandu.

## CHAPTER 6

Tarini stepped into the lobby of the hotel in Indore, the same one that Paulomi and she had stayed at two years ago. She was waiting for the chauffeur to drive her to Mandu.

She was excited and nervous. She kept looking at her watch to check the time and thinking *I am sure I will be late*, but the hands of the clock seemed to be moving very slowly. *I have forgotten to put on my perfume* she wailed to herself and quickly rushed back to her room. *I am behaving like a school girl*, she thought, *I need to stay calm*.

She had landed in Mumbai four days ago. Her brother had come to the airport and they had hugged each other

“You look great,” he had said, “I am so happy that you are doing well.”

“I am so glad to be able to come back. How is Mom doing?”

“She is waiting at home. She wanted to come to the airport but I told her it would be too late.”

When Tarini met her mom, she was surprised to see how much older her mother was looking. *I have been away for just ten months but she is looking older than I remember her to be*, Tarini thought. Her mother held her tight and stroked her head.

“It’s been so long Tarini.”

“Yes, ma,” said Tarini “It been several months and I am happy to be back.”

“But you are here just for a short while.”

“I have to get back; I have very little leave this time as I am not even a year old in the new job.”

“Let me get you some dinner,” said her mother. Tarini started to protest but her brother silenced her.

“She has been so excited that she has been cooking your favourite dishes for the past two days. Let her spoil you.”

Tarini smiled. It was so good to be back with family. She wished she had been a better daughter.

“You have come for such a short trip, yet in the midst of it you are going off to some place?”, her brother asked.

“Yes, I have some office work in Indore. I’ll be gone for just a night,” she said.

Tarini had visited the parlour and dentist for her teeth clean-up before she left for Indore. *I needed to get all my cleansing done in any case*, she tried to rationalise but she knew she was trying to look her best for her meeting in Mandu.

Tarini came down after her last-minute perfume spray and sat in the hotel car. She had chosen her clothes with great care so that they were flattering but yet looked casually put together.

“How much time will it take us to get to Mandu?” she asked the driver although she had checked google maps and she knew it would take her nearly two and a half hours.

The journey was chequered with Tarini checking her maps every now and then to see how much longer the journey was and punctuated with small sips of water. Her mouth seemed to go dry and she was happy she had packed many bottles of water. Finally, they reached the little restaurant that she and Paulomi had stopped for a toilet break when they had come to Mandu looking for the ashram. After a quick bite, she stood outside sipping a chai and smoking a cigarette. She half expected to see Dhawal there in his purple shirt. She remembered her first encounter and his first gawky sentence to her: Good morning madam, myself Dhawal. Was it only two years ago; so much seemed to have happened? She had been recovering from the scandal at that time thinking she would never live it down, and just two years later it seemed inconsequential and far removed from her mind.

They resumed their journey towards the banks of the river at Mandu. They would reach in thirty minutes and Tarini could feel her heart beating faster. *Maybe I should just turn and go back*, she thought to herself, feeling nervous all over again. *Maybe I should never have come*, she said, a natural thought of self-preservation.

She had replied to Dhawal’s message after deliberation, trying to sound nonchalant. *Hi Dhawal she had written, it will be nice to meet in Mandu again and catch up. I will be there on 29 Dec at about 3 o’clock. I am living and working in the USA*

*How have you been?*

They had not communicated since but Tarini would open his picture often and stare at his face. She had decided to play it coolly and without weakness when she met him. *Polly had been right; she thought this meeting will be a proper closure unlike the last one which was so emotionally laden. I will be able to carry on my life, having resolved the past successfully.*

When they reached the markets of Mandu and their car wove its way through the narrow gullies, Tarini felt flushed. She drank some water, feeling a bit queasy in her stomach and popped in a mint. It was cold and she shivered in spite of her adequate layers of warm clothing. The driver parked the car on the side and said, "Madamji, we have reached. You will have to walk a little to reach the banks; the car cannot go further."

As Tarini was stepping out, the driver asked her, "how much time will you be here for?"

Tarini paused and said it could be half an hour or maybe a little longer. "I have your number and will call you when I am ready to go."

The driver nodded and said, "I will meet you at this same spot."

Tarini walked towards the river front. *Here I am*, she thought, *travelling nearly fifteen thousand kilometres to meet a man*. She was surprised at herself for she was normally more pragmatic.

She hoped that Dhawal was already there, so she could see him in the distance. She reached the steps along the river and took a deep breath. It was more beautiful than she remembered it. There were many people, some in prayer, others taking a hold dip. Boatmen were calling passengers and guides were offering their services. And then she saw him sitting on the steps, staring at her.

She walked towards him, her feet guiding her as her mind had lost its control. He stood up, his intense gaze never leaving, binding her in a spell and pulling her towards him. She tried to avert her eyes, not wanting to be mesmerised but her mind would not obey. She reached him and fell into his arms. She had planned that she would stretch out her hand for a professional greeting but all her plans went awry. She buried her face into his chest and everything around her ceased to exist.

"You have become so thin," she managed to say, a bit hoarsely, feeling foolish that this was the first statement that she blurted.

Dhawal said nothing but continued to hold her tight, his arms around her, unconscious of the people around. They stood like this for what seemed an

eternity and finally she broke the embrace, her body unwillingly tearing itself from his.

“Where have you been all this time?” she asked. She had so many questions in her mind.

“Let’s sip a chai together,” he said gently, his voice sending ripples within her, “and then we can sit on the steps.”

They went to the little tea stall and he got two cups of hot tea. The steaming drink felt perfect as the weather turned colder as the sun started its downward descent. They stood in silence, their free hands barely touching each other.

After they finished, he held her hand and guided her to the steps. Dhawal pulled out a folded cloth for Tarini before she sat; “The steps are cold”, he said.

She leaned on him and he put his arm around her and he started to tell her his story. “To become Avishkar Baba, you know I read a lot of books and essays on spirituality and philosophy. I had always had a leaning but these studies, the meditations, the yoga all began affecting me. Avishkar Baba started as a con job but in the process, unknown even to myself at that time, I began taking on his persona. The sermons affected me as much as they did the listeners.

Dhawal, the con artiste wanted fame and followers, wanted to make money fooling people but Avishkar Baba wanted to find the meaning of life, get answers for questions that he did not understand. He was not interested in imparting knowledge, his was a personal journey, a private hunger, a quest that he needed to find an answer for by himself.

So, I left Mumbai a different person than the one who came a year earlier. I did not know where to go, so I decided to go North towards the mountains. I first reached Rishikesh and joined an ashram on the banks of the Ganges. I stayed there for two months practising yoga and meditation under the supervision of learned teachers, reading the scriptures and hearing discourses. It helps me but I had been doing that at Karjat and as Avishkar Baba, I needed more so I went further north to the Himalayas. There, I led a rigorous life on my own, spending days in meditation, eating berries and drinking water from the streams. My body shed all fat and I became a skeleton but I was not any closer to my answers. The problem was that I was never clear on what I was seeking. A band of sadhus were passing by and they were mendicant monks who nourished themselves from the alms of charity givers. Their meals needed to come from begging to survive and they spread knowledge by mingling with people. It was a pilgrim’s way of life, much practised in the Middle ages and the Buddhist monks. I joined them for a few weeks but I left the order as I was not getting closer to my quest for salvation.

Tarini snuggled closer to Dhawal as he spoke evenly and he held her closer to him. I will not let him go away from me this time she thought to herself, forgetting all the reserve that she had come with.

Dhawal continued, "Finally, I went to Allahabad and have been staying there ever since. First, I reached a farming village near the city, on the banks of the River Yamuna. I worked on the fields; slowly my body started recovering from the harsh rigours of my earlier travels. The village food, the fresh milk and the hard labour was good for me. Often, I would sit on the banks and contemplate. I realised that while we have been told of rebirth and many lives, for me in this body there is just this one lifetime. I had briefly tried to find my answers through penance, alone and with a band of monks and in an ashram but it was with tilling the earth and sitting by the water that I felt my inner sense of peace. I sat on the evenings at the *Sangam* at Allahabad, watching the two different rivers blend; the green waters of the Yamuna and the clearer waters of the Ganga; they flowed side by side and eventually merged as one; flow together.

I slowly reached the conclusion that there are many paths all reaching the same point that I was striving for, and leading the life of a householder was one path that could lead me to my goal just as much as meditation in the mountains would. That is when I sent you the message.

The weather had turned colder and Tarini shivered. Dhawal pulled out a shawl from his little bag and wrapped it around Tarini. She snuggled into him. *I will follow him wherever he takes me.*

When I was working, a professor came visiting; he was from the University for Agriculture in Allahabad. He was doing research and we got talking and I have started assisting him in his work on the fields. Gradually, I have been spending more time on research at the university. Eventually I am hoping to take on research work at the university at Hyderabad which is the best for the kind of work interests me. I have already filled in my application. Research is what I do now. I am ready to live the life of the householder."

Tarini moved her fingers along Dhawal's arms and felt the strong muscle from labouring at the farm. *I have been running away for a long time now she thought to herself. I will be able to find sufficient work in Hyderabad for myself; I have no shortage of money. I have made enough compromises in my life, settling down with Dhawal is not one of them. It is what I want and have eventually found.*

The sun had set and the evening prayers started in all the temples around them. Dhawal rose and got two small *diyas* fashioned from leaves. He lit them with Tarini's lighter and together, Tarini and Dhawal set them on the water

gently and saw them float downstream. The little candle boats wobbled at first and then slowly swam away. They sat down, hands entwined, seeing the *diyas* sail away, happy to breathe the same air as each other.

Finally, Dhawal stood up to stretch his legs. Tarini rose too. He turned to her and embraced her. *The circle is complete* thought Tarini. *I have found what I was seeking for and the world is compete for me in his arms.*

Dhawal held her hand and said, "Come Tarini, it's time to go home now."