THE

# SETTLED HOMELESS



Rover V.

# The Settled Homeless



*Rover V*

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# The Story Unfolds

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# Author's Note

I HAVE READ THE PREFATORY disclaimers in many fictions asserting the characters to be purely imaginary, resemblance to any real-life person entirely coincidental. I never found those convincing enough. Such imaginations do not grow out of thin air; they get inspired by people around the author and happenings in their lives, urging the author to take their tales to the world.

Ted, the narrator of this story, is not any particular person; he represents a collation of many individuals who existed or still exist on earth. My long journeys over the lands and seas brought me opportunities to come close to many such colourful personalities; I have witnessed incidents surrounding them and heard from them about many more. The observations and opinions thus gathered I have supplied to Ted, who has stitched those together using a storyline. Changes in names and places have not removed the elements of truth I keenly wanted as recorded; a story has helped make the read easy. However, the story is Ted's, not mine; my job was only scribing it.

I never thought myself much of a novelist, so I could not make Ted one. He is a mere storyteller with sharp eyes, ears and mind in place, accompanied by a warm heart. A true global citizen, Ted carries a passport issued by one country but is never

limited by a bias towards or against any geography or nationality. After he survived a long, extraordinarily successful yet barren life, floating across the world and collecting accolades, the turn of events and someone's love have found Ted the peace and happiness he unwittingly craved for – in a home of his own. There must be many of his likes, longing for the same destinations that remain in their hearts' desire, consciously or otherwise. At the cores of our lives, I believe, the nature of aspirations and the direction of actions remain the same, instinctively and intuitively, even if not intellectually.

If there be a temptation to associate the characters in this book with some celebrated names of similar past and ideas, I shall advise against it; such an attempt may impact the neutrality of a reader's mind.

The portrayal of a detailed picture needs a large canvas; cutting that short adversely affects the quality and appeal. The story, involving many extraordinary characters, sequences of events, and often intriguing viewpoints, has made the volume of the book a little large; the completeness is attained only at the end. I hope a patient reader interested in this book be satisfied with its conclusion.

Once asked about my suggestion on the genre of this book, I was inclined to call it a human documentary. Learning that the description, while frequent in the movie world, is not apt for books, I left the decision to my publisher.

Wishing you happy reading and with sincere thanks for your interest,

Handing over to Ted now,

Rover
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Planet Earth
2022 AD

# I - Beginning in the middle



# Finding Nelly

## *A Brief Yet Involved Episode*



### I – The First Meeting

A long shadow appeared on my laptop before his tall, thin body bent over my shoulder, the bespectacled face of Ash looking intently at me.

'You have to do me a favour, Ted,' he said, almost in a whisper, and hurriedly added, 'my old buddy.'

I was then spending a month in a premium engineering institute in India, which had watched me through my graduate and postgraduate years. The institute had reached out to my parent university in the UK, requesting an expert from the faculty to be sent – against a fee and all expenses covered – to participate in a short duration government-sponsored project. Irrespective of whether I merited the qualification of an expert, multiple reasons made me the preferred selection. I had an Indian passport and was on my way to Australia as a visiting faculty. A stopover in India, for this period, fitted perfectly into the timeline, saving costs for all. Being groomed by and familiar with this institute also added to my brownie points. So, there was I, trying

my best to save my university from any allegation of misplaced confidence.

I met Ash, alias Dr Ashok Thakur, in the US, during a short overlapping period of the beginning of my doctoral studies and Ash finishing his own. Following his return to India, we had not been in regular touch. Still, when I found his matey face shortly after my arrival here, in the crowd of unknown ones amidst many unseen departments and buildings growing over the years since I moved out, I clung to him with the ardour of a long-lost brother. Ash, always amiable to me, was equally warm.

I would have otherwise welcomed any break from the monotony of the work at hand, but something in his manner made me cautious. 'What is it, Ash?' I inquired suspiciously.

A management school was on the same campus as my institute. Just coming on in my days, it had now made a name for itself; Ash chaired one of the critical positions there. To cut his long story to its shortest form, this is what I understood:

Ash was expected to hold a three-hour seminar for his students in the third semester, scheduled the next day. Before the approaching campus interviews, the session was necessary for the attendees to earn bonus credit points. He had just been aware that some unforeseen developments would make him unavailable for the whole day; the schedule that had undergone many prior revisions was unalterable. So, he needed me to fill in for him.

The opportunity to laugh aloud made this interruption worthwhile; I always enjoyed good jokes, except for practical ones.

'Crazy you have always been, Ash, but I never knew about your losing all marbles together.' I swivelled back my chair.

'But you have the simplest of the topics to handle, Teddy Buddy! It's only about some elementary concepts of entrepreneurship.' Ash was not among the ones who resigned early.

'Simplest? Who do you think you are talking to? Theodor Rae or Joseph Schumpeter? My only experience with entrepreneurship was arranging for my garage sale before leaving the US – which finally turned itself into a charity event.' I was not looking at him.

Ash pulled a chair and sat opposite me, in the style of a prize wrestler entering the ring. What ensued was a battle of word and wits with recurrence of dramatics. I positioned many arguments in defence – my only presence in any management school had been as a part-time student and never as a teacher (which was true); any participation in such seminars required my university's approval (which was untrue); most importantly, my never spending any time to read or think about the topic. Every time, Ash would take out darts from his quiver, throwing at whichever he could aim – my sin of having a postdoctoral qualification, the fault of having seen both the worlds of industry and academics, or the crime of being a teacher at a reputed university – all poisoned with disgusting sentimental appeals.

'What problem do you see with this topic? Eh?' he questioned belligerently. 'Search the 'net, and get plenty to read and reproduce in your style. Moreover, you are not supposed to teach anybody anything, only promote awareness. A brilliant mind like yours will come up with the right questions that would force them to think and speak their mind out. The session will be over before you notice the clock on the wall.'

I was getting tired, but Ash continued relentlessly, 'For argument's sake, let us suppose a cat comes and gets your tongue just before you enter the lecture theatre. All right, you still will

have two legs to stand upon, won't you, Teddy? We have a small world here. Do you believe that the boys and girls do not know half of your biography already? Your standing in the hall will be enough. They will be awestruck.

'Some girls must have also discovered that you are an eligible bachelor. They will come forward to your rescue from any troublemaker with the gallantry of feminine forms of Sir Galahad. However, there will be no trouble, I assure you. The most venomous will wave like charmed snakes, keeping in tune with your proverbial oration in classrooms, my Teddy.' Ash clumsily twisted his arm, emulating that serpentine movement, to irritate me even more.

I looked at my watch. Half an hour already wasted fighting a potentially lost battle and several more hours to be written off for the next day. Resigned, I curtly conveyed my acceptance, sarcastically called the offer kind, thanked Ash mockingly, and pulled back my laptop with the cold finality of putting a stop to further conversation. Tousling my hair once, Ash was also leaving without an attempt for one. I stopped him.

'I don't back out of a closed deal, sir, but can you please enlighten the ignoramus before you? Does he get permission to ask – what insuperable constraint is compelling you to pass over this great trophy to him instead of keeping it for yourself?' I asked in a voice full of indignation.

Terror showed on his face, thinking of the consequences of his failure to persuade me. 'You have not met Damini, my wife, yet. In a hurry to reschedule for one last time, I overlooked that tomorrow is the date of our marriage anniversary.' Ash shivered before slamming the door behind.

I thanked my guardian angel for keeping me unmarried.

That evening, it took me long hours to make up for the lost time and keep some buffer ready for the next day. I returned to the institute's guest house, finished a quick shower and frugal dinner, cursed myself for my gullibility, pitied Ash for losing sight of a phenomenally successful career in sales, and typed the word 'entrepreneurship' on my browser.



Twenty-six pairs of eyes silently greeted me in the lecture hall, all fixed on my face. While breaking the stillness wishing them a good afternoon, I could quickly scan through the expressions the faces wore, ranging from mild curiosity about the new package delivered on the podium to sleepy indifference – untainted by any indication of interest in the subject or the session itself.

I began with a confession about my own anxiety, which I claimed comparable with theirs, to be over with this unavoidable period of tribulation. I also solicited the attendees' cooperation to make it as sufferable as possible for all. That helped; most of them started looking more human rather than neatly dressed mummies, and a few even smiled.

An early stage of my life allowed me regular visits to various libraries when I was drawn to the primary texts on ancient Indian philosophy. Full of wise observations, established through impeccable logical consistency, those could charm a mature mind powered by logic but were unlikely to touch an average learner's heart. I later discovered the main messages from all those teachings, wrapped in rich storylines, to have given birth to another class of texts developed in a subsequent period. The

essences of the same lessons conveyed with lucidity, appropriate metaphors, and succinctness made them more effective.

That edification greatly influenced my style of teaching in the future. I always tried to supplement the standard texts and theories with relevant real-life stories, mixed with a few cooked-up and enjoyable anecdotes, to arrive at the intended conclusions – references left at the end for further serious studies by those whose interest I could stir up.

The generic nature of the topic made the day ripe for applying that technique. My initial apathy had faded, discovering some good stimulants for thought in the slated subject. My memory cooperated by prompting the right lines at the proper time, and my sense of humour did not disappear into hiding. I could also make all my presentations interesting. The group was wide awake within the start-up phase itself.

While searching the 'net for material on this topic during the previous night, like an alien collecting his samples from this planet into its jar within a minimal period, I had included only those elements in my planned scripts that left deep marks. I already knew how to take the class back and forth, stories and events ranging over personalities and significant historical milestones, the landscape covering multiple geographies, and names that should have been familiar to the class. Before we went halfway through the session, most faces registered involvement, if not interest. To my surprise, I also was enjoying myself.

Every lecture segment ended with questions asking for viewpoints; solid debates immediately followed the hesitant initial responses. Smilingly, I paced across the floor, sometimes taking part in the discussion, spending the rest of the time trying to drag in the detached looking ones. No discourse reached any conclusion within the short time allocated, but that was

not important. Raising the right questions to remain in minds, including mine, was the aim.

I hated to end the session, but it was already past three hours without a single murmur of protest. Also, I remembered the pile of work waiting at my desk. Leaving any reference was redundant in the internet era. I had already shown them the style of searching for the right questions and answers, the only possible thing in one limited-time session with my inadequate preparation. A question-answer session was essential to the protocol that I honoured, announcing the time limit.

At that slot, the first question I faced was, 'Sir, wherefrom did you collect so many of these stories?' I told them honestly and modestly that ten per cent came from standard texts, another ten from my teachers, and the rest from whatever I had picked up from the road of my journey through the third planet and its people with their works.

One wise guy smirked and asked, 'Sir, you seem to have collected too many for a lifetime… how old are you, then?'

I reflected and then answered, 'Say around hundred and sixty years.'

The reactions varied, from expressions of incredulity to wishfully looking forward to some more frivolities they found entertaining. From somewhere in a corner, one girl tentatively raised her eyebrows and a fair hand. 'Definitely, you are not serious, sir!'

I looked her straight in the eye and replied, 'Yes, I am. Young lady, your age cannot be measured merely by reading the duration of your heart's beating or your lungs' exhalation on a chronometer. You have to multiply that figure by the amplitude of your experience, the frequency with which you update yourself, and the intensity of your "living".'

She turned out to be a mean debater. Her voice was soft but audible, not without a hint of sarcasm, the time she got back at me, 'Thanks for the remarkable concept, sir. Incidentally, the terms you played with were the ones we had found related to acoustics when studying physics. Should they not have been correctly chosen as amplitude, frequency and quality?'

Instead of ignoring the comment as extraneous, I nodded and admitted with a broad smile, 'Of course, dear. Only take one last note for today – the intensity of living determines the quality of life.'



The next day, I was late for lunch and managed to enter the empty institute cafeteria at the last moment, open for only some sandwiches and coffee. When taking the finishing sip, I heard a feminine voice. 'Good afternoon, sir. May I join you for a few minutes?'

Lifting my head, I saw that girl stand before me, who I advised taking my last note for their session. Determined to cap the time to only a few minutes as she had said, I smiled affably and said, 'Sure, dear. Please, take a seat.'

Suddenly, she stiffened. 'Thanks for the endearment, sir, but I am used to being called Nelly.'

The unwarranted rudeness was as surprising to me as it was irritating. Somehow managing to regain my composure, I responded in a tired voice, 'My apologies, Nelly. Although I left this country many years ago, I should still have anticipated the culture gap. Is there anything you wanted to tell me?' I was about to pull my chair back.

She tried an awkward grin, broad though. 'I should be the one to beg apology, sir, for my impulsive impudence. I wanted

to thank you for such a marvellous class yesterday, so enjoyable after a long time.'

It was not the compliments but the embarrassment on her that mellowed me out. I sat down again, thanked her for the kind words, mentioned my paucity of time, and asked her frankly, 'I think there was something else in your mind too, isn't it? Can you please make it short and snappy?'

Nelly answered with a sheepish grin, 'Yes, sir. I thought of asking you about some career opportunities. Not now, anymore, seeing that you are pressed for time.'

She had already left the seat when I motioned her back. Before I could ask 'why me', she added quickly, 'In fact, I was tempted to think of a career as a teacher abroad. Wondered...,' she broke off.

I scrutinised her face briefly to judge how sincere that incompletely stated purpose could be, at least as one of the purposes. Finally, I took out one of my visiting cards to add my personal email address on its reverse.

'Later, please write to me with the questions you may have in mind. I shall try to respond, but please expect no promise of any assistance, only information. Write to my official address only if it involves my university. Otherwise, use the personal one.' I also mentioned, 'I never take calls and messages from unknown numbers. Now, I must excuse myself, Nelly. I am swamped with work today.'

I left behind a slightly happier looking Nelly, reading between the lines on my card.

## II – Hearing About Her

The day before I left the institute, all tasks completed, I had to present myself before Ash to honour his invitation for lunch.

Turning a deaf ear to his many other suggestions, I chose the same cafeteria as our meeting place. It was closest to the guest house, and I intended to waste no time in tiresome local drives immediately before embarking on another long journey.

We two sat in a corner, an unhappy Ash resenting my choice of such unprepossessing a venue. His mood elevated only after I admitted, 'I should thank you for your tips for that session, Ash. It worked perfectly.'

His smile of satisfaction, followed by his words evidencing self-pride, met my expectations. 'I might never have been so bright in academics like you, Teddy Boy, but you should have some respect for my grey hairs.'

I didn't have the heart to tell him that I must have tried if noticing any hair on his head, grey or otherwise, had been easy. My gaze shifted to different areas in the restaurant, searching for more topics to add to the conversation, till it fell upon Nelly. Sitting alone at another end, she had her attention focused on the lunch plate before her. In a low voice, I pointed her to Ash. 'This Nelly girl… Is she naturally rude?'

Surprised, Ash gave Nelly and then me a questioning eye, 'Why, Ted! Surely, Nelly did not misbehave in your class, did she?'

I assured him with my matter-of-fact reply, 'No, she didn't.'

Ash did not press the matter any further. Stirring his coffee cup with an unclean looking spoon for some time, he began on his own, 'This girl is a real crazy. She was excellent with her studies and got admission to the computer science undergraduate programme like both of us did. One of the class toppers since the entrance, as you always were. That was before she lost her mind.'

I was listening with interest. Ash continued, 'During her fourth semester, she got entangled with a boy, a spoiled brat

and confirmed addict, who was then finishing his undergraduate course, not without hurdles. The institute's reputation, compounded with the skills of our placement office, somehow gets a decent job even for the worst of the lot – he also got one. After he left, we realised that Nelly too had fled with him, leaving behind her successfully started but unfinished career completed only up to four semesters.'

I eyed Nelly and put in, 'What about her parents? In our time, aided by law and political musclemen, they would have stormed into this place to tear it down to pieces. And, discover that the director had fled too, together with a couple of deans.'

'She had lost her mother just one year before joining the institute. The lonely father was already suffering from dementia; he is, even today. That did cost her one academic year before coming here,' Ash replied.

He looked at his watch, anxious to complete the narrative in time. 'Nelly returned one year later to resume her course. That is the permissible limit if the student can present a proper medical certificate – well, she produced one. But, her life had already changed. Wielding the armour of a cold stare and rude avoidance of anybody known, except under compulsion to attend the lecture or lab, did not help her. That could keep the direct questions at bay but not silence the varieties of gossip moving from one corner to another, devised by the insatiate curiosities of both girls and boys. Some of those rumours could not have failed to reach her. Even the teachers no longer behaved favourably with the former apple of their eyes. At one point in time, we thought she would break down and fly off again, for one last time.

'She had to battle against too many odds, from her inquisitive new classmates to the lately unfavourable environment, including the challenges of catching up with her studies after so

long an absence. She fought bravely, no reflection of any internal perturbation appearing on her. During the balance of four semesters, she forged her way ahead to complete her undergraduate course with respectable grade points. I could not have done it myself, Ted.'

'Neither could I,' was my candid confession.

Ash moved forward. 'The unconventional pattern of a still respectable academic performance, but punctuated with long gaps, severely impacted her selection during campus interviews. Prospective employers always look for opportunities to make the first level of elimination based on records, and she was a soft target. Very respectable ones would not allow her even an interview, while Nelly slipped by miles in the interviewee lists of others. Offers she received, but grabbing just anything, was unacceptable for her ego. For once, she looked distraught and helpless.

'And then?' I asked, darting a glance at Nelly.

Ash answered grimly, 'We thought moving away from the department would help things, and advised her to join this management school, to start with a clean slate. Nelly again scored a fabulous percentile in the entrance exam. Her records are yet unblemished here. But, her earlier jaunty disposition has not been restored. She continues wearing the same armours here too, and is generally aloof, her bitterness erupting abruptly out of incomprehensible triggers. Many students now believe that Nelly is a mental case. They try to maintain as much distance as she wants herself. She lives and likes living as an outcast. I only hope that she finds employment offers that match her preferences this time.

'And this long story is to beg your pardon for Nelly, in case she had behaved in any untoward way.'

Natural questions crossed my mind to be voiced. 'How come you know so much about Nelly, Ash? Do you keep tabs on the personal details of every student these days? And why are you so keen to correct any wrong impression she might have left on a stranger with a scarce chance of ever meeting in life again?'

After about half a minute, his jerky reply came, 'She is Damini's first cousin, a favourite of us both. Damini's love and concern for her, instead of diminishing, has only increased; probably so has mine. But, she maintains a distance with us.'

I nodded my understanding moodily. The shrew Ash had painted on his first reference to Damini was replaced by a kind lady who knows to love. The story was full of pathos, but I was happy to understand that Ash was not spending his life in the wrong company.

Now was time for us to get up and allow life to take us to different paths again, with the possibility but no visible probability of crossing soon. We clasped hands and then warmly embraced each other. Over his shoulder, I looked at the corner where she was sitting.

Nelly had left.

## III – Tutoring En Route

Disproving what I had foretold, I met Nelly the very next day. In the backseat of a comfortable chauffeur driven car, kindly arranged by the institute, I was then on my way back to the city.

Ash had already transformed her in my mind from a rude brat to a brave heart, a resolute fighter, an enduring survivor. I could perceive the enormity of her struggle in a very conservative society that, unfortunately, was also prevalent on an

advanced institute's campus. I sincerely wished she had and would find the newer people in her life to be friendly and charitable again.

Nelly was waiting with her bags, obviously for some public transport. I could never make sure whether it was my newly grown respect for her spirit or the fear of a solitary ride to the city – a very long and tedious one through the most depressing landscapes – that made me stop and open the door to cry out, 'Hello, Nelly. I am going back today. I would have no problem dropping you at a more convenient location, including any part of the city.'

Nelly was hesitant for a moment, but a long wait must have made her tired already. She thanked me for the offer with a wan smile and seemed indecisive about occupying the front seat or keeping her luggage there to join me at the back, finally settling in favour of the latter. She also was going to the city, she told me.

There was no conversation for some time. Nelly sat silently looking through her window; I was frowning with distaste at the unruly traffic of pedestrians, vehicles, and quadrupeds, popping up every now and then to block our roads until we were at the comfortably smooth highway.

'It is a long drive to the city, Nelly; heaven only knows taking how many hours,' I was the first to break the silence, 'You had some questions for me, you told me. Instead of keeping all for your future mails, with risks of being overlooked or getting a delayed response, you may ask some now when we are not doing anything else.'

She studied my face with cold eyes. 'What was Dr Thakur telling you about me?'

I returned the same stare with an added frown of disapproval. 'Culture gap again, Nelly. In most lands, expressing

curiosity about any conversation involving other parties and held in your absence would be considered grossly impolite of you.'

Immediately, I regretted my harsh words and studied her face apprehensively; hurt, if any, was not perceptible. It could be she was seasoned with such treatment meted out by many or was an expert in concealing emotions. It might as well be both.

Her eyes flashed once before she started soliloquising in monotone, 'And how I wish I too were there. Nobody not knowing your life's facts will judge you based on public opinion and rumours. Nobody will spend idle time discussing you behind your back, with tongues sharper than knives and chuckles sparking off poisonous bolts. Where people will be kind enough not to notice your presence when that demands no attention...' She fell silent again, her face expressionless.

An odd reaction to show before an almost stranger! But privy to some facts supplied by Ash and the gaps filled in by my imagination, I could understand and feel for her. I gave her some time to pour out her sorrow if that brought her any relief, but she kept her nose stuck to the windowpane without a single more word. I again noticed that, unlike most of her contemporaries, her language was rich in words and expressions, and her presentation sophisticated, bearing marks of good schooling, grooming, and refined taste.

'I guess I understand what you generally mean,' I told her, 'but not your making that land sound as if it exists in your dreams only. Plenty of such places is there in this world, Nelly. I have personally lived in many. Wouldn't it make more sense to develop an achievable plan to reach one if you are keen, instead of grieving about its current absence around you?'

'I have tried making many such plans, sir, only to lose my way. Doing it alone is difficult, and I have nobody available

and willing to guide me. I fear it will never be possible,' a sad voice answered.

'I always respect the bright young minds, more so when they can speak my language,' traces of a smile of gratification did not escape my notice, 'which prevents me from repeating the cliché – everything is possible. Unless we replace "everything" with "many things" and "is" with "maybe". Whether something is possible or not can be concluded only after taking our minds through all probable routes leading to it.

'Take, for example, your career option as a teacher that you wanted to discuss. I am logically assuming you meant in a reputed university in an English-speaking country. Now I propose a game like the ones we played in our session that day. Let us try to identify all possible paths that may take today's Nelly there, and strike out the infeasible ones, until we are left with the three options – none, one or many. "None" means that no way is presently visible to make that happen, although it may emerge later. The result of "one" will make things simpler, while "many" will bring in another task of choosing the best. And this jam-packed road leaves several hours at our disposal to try this game. Should we?' I asked with a beaming smile.

With signs of interest in her eyes, uncompressed lips displaying part of her white teeth, she turned and sat facing me diagonally, looking more like a schoolgirl facing a quiz, 'Sounds like worth trying, sir.'

With an approving nod, I asked her to begin by speaking a little about herself.

After about ten minutes, I wordlessly praised her ability to think and present. Nelly made a laudable summary of her education, perceived strengths and weaknesses, and her salient preference for the nature of subjects supported by rationale. She

did that with admirable precision, omitting no essential items but carefully eliminating everything contextually irrelevant. I became confident of her grand success in the following campus interviews to obliterate the unpleasant memories of the earlier ones.

Any responsible teacher would recommend her getting back into a stable career path again, not ruling out an agreeable management position as one option. I felt inclined to dissuade her from making any impetuous plan for a journey into the uncertain world of academics, entirely unknown to her. At the same time, I understood sermonising her to be of no avail; any such conclusion must emerge through logical reasoning.

'An impressive self-introduction, Nelly. Congratulations,' I gave a short clap. 'Now, which subject or subjects would be your choice to teach?'

Nelly seemed indecisive. 'I am not sure whether pursuing an academic career in management sciences may help, sir.'

Her irresolution gave me the opportunity I needed. I explained, 'The primary purpose of a management school, anywhere globally, is not training its pupils for teaching but preparing them for the industries. For all your core academic subjects, from economics to operations research, only experts from their dedicated schools in those disciplines are hired as faculty. Other teachers come enriched with their vast practical experience in the industries.

'Don't exactly know which courses can lead to further qualifications post MBA. A DBA I have only heard of. But, the latter's objective will again essentially be grooming you for the industry. And, that will be more meaningful if you can gather some professional experience in the interim.' I stopped, satisfied that I had done my initial bit.

She was intelligent enough to get the drift and looked at me reproachfully, 'I don't think that was the rule of the game, sir. We were supposed to explore all avenues taking me where I wanted to be. The industry was no part of that. So, have we already found all possible paths in the education sector as blocked?'

I took the mild reproof in good grace. 'No, not yet, Nelly. Nevertheless, before going ahead, I shall make one request, as a senior professional who has seen parts of both worlds. In the voyage of your life, never remain rigid about the destination so long as you enjoy the thrill of the journey. Now, your subjects, if you please.'

This time, she digressed on her own, remaining on my last remark, 'What if I choose a wrong destination, the thrill leading to an inordinate delay in discovering that?'

I searched my mind for a while before answering. 'I am uncertain about what to call inordinate; that word I rarely use. I, a simple person, have a simple answer for you. Nothing is too late, as long as you can retain your courage and stamina and remain open to paying the price of necessary course corrections, post any such discovery.'

Meanwhile, she must have been busy mentally browsing through the options for subjects and came back after making up her mind. 'I find only my original subject to make sense at present, sir, going back to computer science. Do I give my reasons?'

I shook my head in negation; that could be the only logical option, anyway. Still with some feasibility, even if remote. Nonetheless, I thought it wise to explain, 'When you need not, also please try to understand what that entails. That means you wait another year before writing the entrance examination for the postgraduate course. After that, complete another series of

tests and interviews admitting you to a doctoral program in a university of repute. You can think of teaching in the same or a similar institution only after acquiring that degree.

'Many snakes may be lying hidden beneath the steps of those ladders. Despite all your brilliance, you may fail to qualify for any next step for umpteen other reasons, making further climbing harder for you, maybe even impossible. I have no right to ask whether financing is a problem for you. Please note that expecting scholarships and other earning opportunities to cover all your expenses during the overseas courses are more like expecting a dodo bird to sit on your lap anytime now. They are not rare anymore, Nelly, just extinct. Well, there are many other potential failure points too.' I gulped some mineral water and waited for her reaction after adding, 'And the immediate alternate opportunities will not wait indefinitely for you.'

Nelly was listening patiently and attentively. Towards the end, a twinkle appeared in her eyes; her tightly pressed lips broke into a sardonic smile. 'To think what you just told me, sir, that nothing is ever too late… Nevertheless, before any final decision, I shall surely weigh all the pros and cons, take any risk only if calculated beforehand, and willingly pay the price for any mistake. In the worst situation, my high school will always be there to welcome as a teacher.' She sounded resolved.

I saw no reason to belabour my arguments; the game was over shortly after it began. I ended it with an appeal to Nelly to at least appear at the forthcoming campus interviews with all sincerity; that would allow her to defer the final decision by several months. She promised with a solemn-looking bow.



I have always observed one major weakness in people, spending a long time in academics; they forget how to decisively finish a project before the entire budget for time or finance runs into overdraft.

After a small break for tea, we were on our way again. To my pleasant surprise, Nelly started talking freely, confiding in me about how she kept herself abreast of her undergraduate subjects, finding her current ones uninteresting. I heard her but was not listening attentively; my mind was absorbed in the earlier discussion thread. Startling her, I suddenly sat erect. 'Look, Nelly, I think we have ignored an alternative path leading to your teaching career. Why has it to necessarily go abroad? Well-reputed universities and institutes have already filled this country; why not one of those? That reduces many risks and troubles.'

Nelly slowly moved her head from one side to another, 'Afraid that will not work for me, sir. Overseas, I mentioned on the first day.' She was getting into her pensive mood again.

'I have noted your preference. I heard you give your reasons too,' I contested with vehemence. 'None was convincing enough to justify your flight from the country. I always encourage everybody to explore other lands, but with the positive aspirations of an adventurist fascinated by the new, never for running away under any duress and desperation.'

'It may be my limitation,' I remarked after a pause, 'but in my life, I never cared for what others thought or spoke of me on the sly. The only person whose opinion or judgement matters to me is the one I face every day in the mirror.'

The melancholy found its way back to her; Nelly's voice sounded hoarse, 'How many times have you failed to determine the sanity of that person gaping at you from the other side?'

I remained phlegmatic. 'Not even once, till date. However, I know perfectly well what I need to do in the unlikely case of such confusion. Nelly, like our bodies, our minds retain every right to fall ill; like the bodies, the mental systems also need treatment for healing. I shall seek the necessary professional help on such an occasion with no feeling of shame or guilt. The contingency will not shake my self-confidence. And that's why I may never feel that way at all.

'Whenever you may anticipate any imminent adversity, evident or unfounded, don't start running away – remain prepared to combat it. The threat perception will be blown away, leaving you a confident Nelly again, protected by a strengthened sense of security. The ghosts chase only those who get scared easily because ghosts never exist in reality. The imaginations of the fearful minds give shape to them.

Nelly showed a grin, a spontaneous one. 'I have the benefit of looking at your card, sir. Otherwise, I could have taken you for a professor for philosophy.'

My ruminative mind did not take her comment lightly. 'What do you think of philosophy, Nelly? Just the name of another subject from a syllabus? To teach, study or write term papers on? You are mistaken, then; philosophy is a way of looking into life.

'There is a philosopher in every human being, including you and me, hidden or unveiled. When invoked, the philosopher helps us penetrate deeply into a puzzle, incisively separating the parts into simple and solvable units that look so complex when interwoven. The philosophy makes a conscious mind note the new lessons learned through every experience worth remembering and relate those to the existing knowledge. It reconciles both after resolving any conflict to finally arrive at a consistent and

extended knowledge base, sharpening the mind further to prepare for the next challenge.'

'Never felt one be in me,' Nelly slipped in a comment.

I addressed that. 'Whether you consciously feel that philosopher in you is immaterial if you remain able to perceive the philosopher's implicit directives. I have heard many profound philosophical statements from persons who had never been acquainted with the formal subject or works of an acclaimed philosopher.'

I stopped, feeling guilty for troubling this poor girl with too many lectures. Nelly sat in silence for minutes and commented, 'I wish I could meet someone like you earlier. I mean, as my teacher, sir.'

I ignored her embarrassment and changed to lighter topics. Nelly found the naming paradox for chicken wings in America rather funny. Called Chicago Wings in Philadelphia and Buffalo Wings in Chicago, I found them named after Kentucky in the Buffalo State. I narrated how I, shuttling between countries, used to confuse the direction of traffic to be fined or snubbed by police or the public. Also, in my first few days overseas, how I had run for life to cross a road till I discovered the switches at the crossings for requesting vehicles to stop. None of those quick recollections was rich in humour, but we laughed together loudly, trying to break out of the gravity of the earlier long conversations. The rest of our journey continued to be pleasant.

Following her direction, when I dropped Nelly off at a point on the way to my hotel, I casually asked whether finding any local transport to her home would be easy. She gave me a blank look before answering, 'Home I don't have. Not anymore. Yes, we have one house, but that's far off in another direction. I shall stay in a guest house here for tonight and catch a train tomorrow morning.'

We smiled at each other and waved goodbye.

I watched Nelly's figure disappear into the crowd. An extraordinary girl, I thought, intelligent too. But perceptibly immature, too busy with troubles and struggles in her small world with very little or no exposure to the much larger one outside. Had she only known the stories of their chequered lives that many apparently successful characters always kept to themselves!

Once again, like in a movie flashback, my past years started parading into my mind, the sequence beginning from early childhood.

I did not sleep well until boarding the flight to Australia a day later.