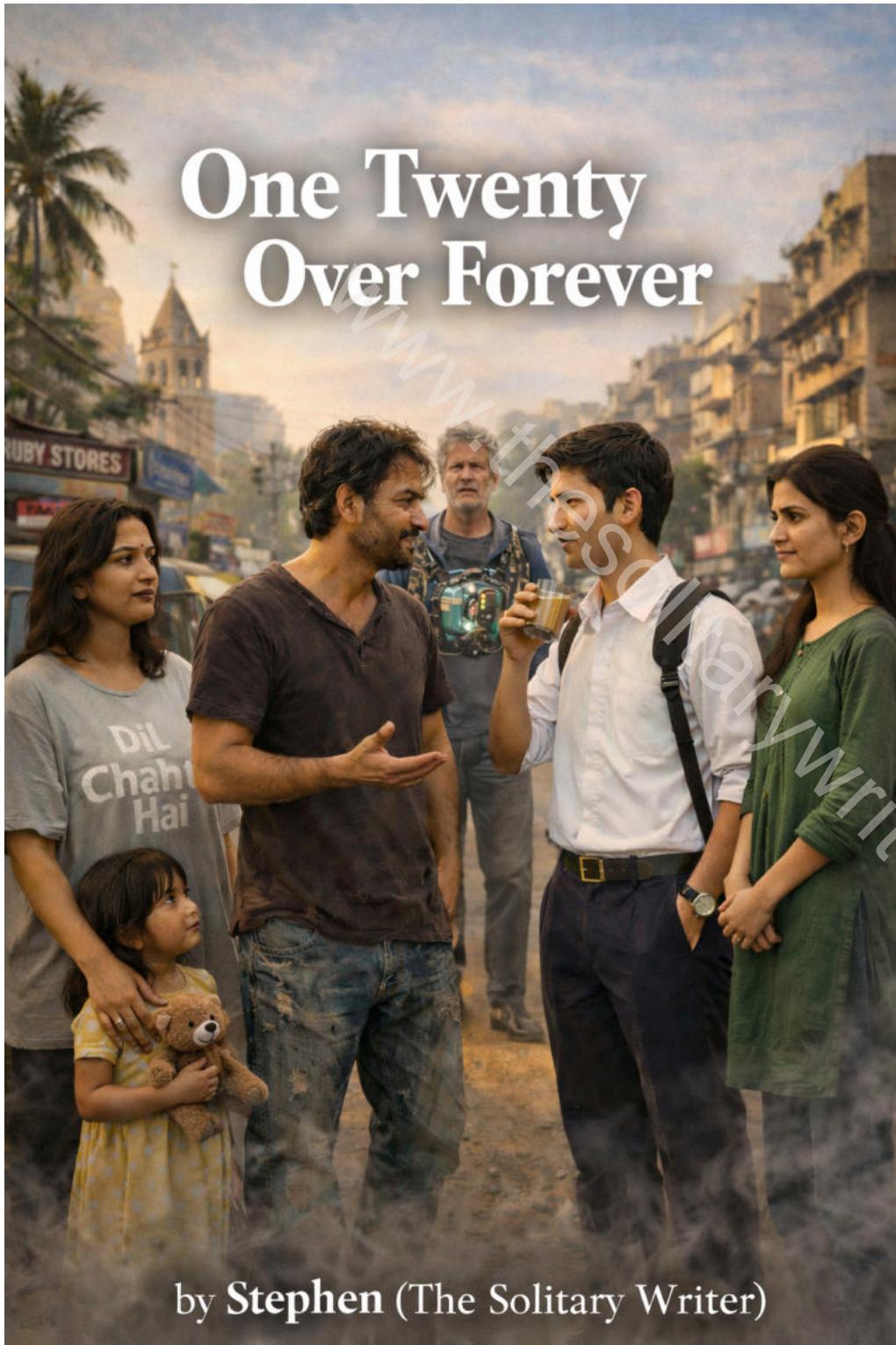


One Twenty Over Forever

By Stephen (The Solitary Writer)

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Chapter 1 - Like a Samosa in a Microwave

Samar Arockiaraj woke up because his heart was already running late for something.

Not jogging. Not romance. Not ambition. Just..... vibrating.

He lay still on his back, staring at the faint water stain on his bedroom ceiling, a shape vaguely resembling the map of India if you squinted and forgave it generously.

The room smelled like last night's instant noodles and eucalyptus oil.

Charlotte drizzle tapped gently against the window, like someone trying not to interrupt his anxiety.

He exhaled.

Then the woman ruined everything.

"Good morning, Samar. I am reminding you to check your BP."

He flinched so hard his calf cramped.

"No," he whispered into the empty room. "No no no no Alexa."

"Reminder cancelled," Alexa chirped.

"Would you like me to reschedule it for tomorrow?"

"No. Don't even joke about that."

He sat up slowly, as if sudden movement might provoke a stroke out of spite.

The blood pressure monitor sat on his counter.

White.

Rectangular.

Smug.

It hadn't moved.

It didn't need to.

It knew what it had done.

He stood up and padded barefoot toward the kitchen, deliberately not looking at it, the way one avoids eye contact with an ex at Costco.

The apartment was too quiet.

No toothbrush sharing cup on the sink.

No second mug on the drying rack.

No passive-aggressive Post-it notes saying "Take out trash?"

Just him and his cardiovascular system.

He poured himself water. Drank. Paused. Checked his pulse with two fingers like he'd seen in movies.

Fast.

Too fast.

"Great. The day hasn't even started and my heart is already sprinting toward death"

He opened his phone.

Typed:

"heart rate 98 resting is this normal"

Followed by, "white coat hypertension how long before sudden death"

And , "Can anxiety cause heart attack"

And lastly , "silent heart attack symptoms"

He closed his eyes.

"You are thirty-seven," he told himself.

"You eat kale sometimes. You live in Charlotte. People here live forever out of spite."

He went back into the bathroom.

Stood in front of the mirror.

Dark circles.

Stubble he'd given up negotiating with.

A man who looked medically disappointing.

"You're fine," he said.

"Your heart is fine. Your arteries are fine. You just need data."

The BP machine beeped once like it was awake now.

He froze.

Why did it beep? Why would it blink? It doesn't blink.

He took a step back.

"Relax. It's a machine. It doesn't have intent. It doesn't remember Santacruz West, 2006. It doesn't know about Dr. Kamath."

The name slipped out before he could stop it.

His chest tightened.

The fan in his head turned on.

He never sees a normal number. That's exactly why the fear survives.

Chapter 2 - The First Doctor in 18 Years

By 10:37 a.m., Samar Arockiaraj was standing outside Marquis Family Medicine, sweating through a hoodie he had no business wearing in May.

Charlotte drizzle clung to his hair like a judgmental aunt.

He stared at the glass door.

People walked in.

People walked out.

He wiped his palms on his jeans.

“Okay,” he whispered. “In. Out. No strokes.”

He pushed the door open.

The smell hit him immediately.

Disinfectant.

Mint gum.

Printer toner.

And something citrus.

A medical smell, a smell that had ruined his adolescence.

His heart kicked.

The receptionist looked up and smiled.

“Hi there! Name?”

“Samar Arockiaraj. I might faint later, just a heads-up.”

She blinked once.

“...Okay.”

She handed him a clipboard.

“Any allergies?”

“Yes. Doctors.”

He sat in a plastic chair that squeaked under the weight of his destiny.

A cooking show played silently on the wall TV. A woman across from him knitted something aggressive. A toddler licked the armrest.

His knee bounced.

His Apple watch buzzed.

Heart rate: 127.

“Fantastic. I haven’t even died yet and my heart is already trying to get it over with.” I thought.

A nurse called his name.

He stood up too fast.

The world tilted.

“Still alive,” he announced to nobody.

Dr. Linda Park wore sneakers with cartoon kidneys on them.

That felt intentional. She rolled in on a stool and smiled.

“So, Samar. What brings you in today?”

He gripped the edge of the exam table.

“I think I have high blood pressure.”

“Okay.”

“But only when doctors check my blood pressure.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Which means I don’t know if I have high blood pressure.”

“Right.”

“Which means I definitely have high blood pressure.”

She paused. “...Okay.”

“And I haven’t been to a doctor since 2006.”

Her fingers stopped typing. “...Okay.”

“And I Googled ‘silent heart attack’ fourteen times this morning.”

She leaned back slightly. “...Okay. So. Let’s start with not panicking.”

She wrapped the cuff around his arm.

The Velcro made a dry ripping sound that went straight into his spine.

His pulse leapt like it had seen a ghost.

The machine whirred.

The cuff tightened.

Too tight.

He stared at the ceiling tiles. “This is it. This is how I go. Alone. In a clinic room.”

The machine beeped.

Dr. Park looked at the screen.

Her eyebrows twitched.

“Hmm.”

Samar’s stomach dropped.

“What’s hmm. Don’t say hmm. Hmm is not a number.”

She tilted the screen slightly away from him.

“That’s... elevated.”

“How elevated. Like ‘drink water’ elevated or ‘write your will’ elevated.”

She exhaled. “152 over 90.”

She held up a hand. “Okay. This doesn’t automatically mean you have hypertension.”

“Those are indeed hypertension numbers.”

“They can be anxiety numbers too,” she continued.

“I am anxious.” Samar sighed.

She nodded. “You’re visibly anxious. Your pulse is 135. Your leg hasn’t stopped shaking since you sat down.”

He looked down.

It was true. His leg was doing a solo dance number.

“This is called white-coat hypertension,” she said gently. “It happens when people get anxious in medical settings.”

“I told you. Beige coat. Scrubs. Authority-figure.”

She smiled despite herself. “Let’s wait five minutes and repeat it.”

Five minutes later, it was 149/84.

Samar closed his eyes.

“So. Coffin or urn?”

She squeezed his arm lightly. “Samar. You are thirty-seven. You don’t smoke. Your labs are normal. Your heart rate is anxiety-driven. This looks like classic white-coat hypertension.”

“Then why is it still high?” Samar asked.

“Because you are still scared.” She replied.

“That feels circular and rude.”

She typed into his chart. “You know what. I’m going to refer you to a cardiologist. Just to be absolutely sure everything is okay.”

His left eye twitched.

“A... heart doctor.”

“Yes.”

“I came here to reduce my anxiety.”

She printed the referral.

He walked out clutching the paper like it was a death sentence.

The drizzle had turned into a committed mist.

He stood on the sidewalk and read the name.

Dr. Rohan Desai, MD (Cardiology)

He swallowed.

“Okay,” he whispered.

“Just... one more doctor. What’s the worst that could happen?”

His heart thumped hard in response.

Like it had opinions.

Chapter 3 - Dr. Desai and the World's Healthiest Hypochondriac

The clinic of Dr. Rohan Desai was located in a medical complex that felt like a hospital pretending to be a tech startup.

Clean white walls. Minimalist wooden furniture. A plant that looked like it required emotional support.

Jazz was playing. Not real jazz. Healthcare jazz.

Samar sat in the waiting area, flipping through a Men's Health magazine that featured a smiling man on the cover holding a salad and a dumbbell like they were his twins.

He muttered to himself: "Liar."

A nurse called his name.

Dr. Desai had the calm, shiny face of a man who had never once eaten after 9 p.m.

Tall. Fit. Warm smile. Tan chinos. A polo shirt that somehow didn't wrinkle.

He flipped through Samar's chart.

"So... 37. No history of smoking. No alcohol. No known cardiac conditions. Labs normal. Normal resting heart rate, except during...."

He looked up.

"Medical visits."

Samar nodded grimly. "It spikes when I see white coats. Or blood pressure cuffs. Or rooms with large printers."

Dr. Desai raised an eyebrow. "Printers?"

"They smell like death."

He tapped his pen.

"Okay. So you've had elevated readings during checkups, but otherwise feel fine?"

"Yes."

“Chest pain? Dizziness? Shortness of breath?”

“Yes. All three. But also... possibly just when I think about those three things.”

Dr. Desai smiled. “Panic attacks?”

Samar shrugged. “Maybe. Possibly. Light ones”

“Any family history of heart disease?”

“No, but I’m convinced I’ll start the trend.”

Dr. Desai laughed. “Alright. We’ll start with an ECG, then move to an echocardiogram, and finally a treadmill stress test. Full workup.”

Samar blinked. “I came here for less drama.”

The doctor patted his shoulder. “Let’s get to the bottom of this.”

It was one of the less busiest hospitals in the city. Which hospital does all those procedures on a single day.

Ten minutes later, Samar lay shirtless in a cold room while a nurse stuck electrodes to his chest.

“This might feel cold.”

“It already does.”

“Try to relax.”

“If I relax, the test will be invalid.” I murmured.

She turned on the machine.

Lines appeared on the screen — pulsing, jagged squiggles. Samar stared at them.

“That spike looks rude.”

The nurse smiled. “That’s your heart’s QRS complex.”

“It’s very aggressive.”

She printed the results.

“Doctor will be in shortly.”

Samar sat up.

“Do I look like I’m dying?”

“You look like you think you’re dying.”

Next was Echocardiogram – The Gel Test

Another room. Another nurse. A wand. Cold blue gel.

The technician moved the probe across his chest like she was trying to find a parking spot.

A grainy grey image of his heart appeared on the screen. It looked like a jellyfish dancing at a wedding.

“Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s kind of... bouncy.”

“That’s normal. Your valves are working great.”

“Even the mitral?”

She squinted. “Perfectly.”

She pointed. “Look at this. Blood flow’s steady. Chambers look great. No murmurs. No thickening.”

Samar narrowed his eyes. “It’s hiding something.”

And the last test was the Stress Test! The final level.

He stood on a treadmill with wires taped to his chest, feeling like a government experiment.

Dr. Desai stood nearby, watching the monitor.

“Let’s start slow.”

Two minutes in, Samar was walking.

Four minutes in, he was jogging.

Six minutes in, he was wheezing.

“My heart is going to jump out and sue me.”

Dr. Desai watched calmly. “You’re doing fine.”

Seven minutes. Heart rate: 179. “Alright, please stop.” The doctor said.

Samar stopped abruptly. The world swayed.

Back in his office, Dr. Desai looked at all three reports.

He sighed.

“Samar,” he said, looking up. “I’m going to be very honest with you.”

Samar braced himself.

“I’ve never seen someone this healthy be this convinced they’re dying.”

Samar blinked.

“...What?”

“Your ECG is clean. Your echo shows a strong, efficient heart. Your stress test was boringly perfect.”

“Boringly?”

“You’re basically a cardiovascular golden retriever.”

Samar opened his mouth. Then closed it. Again opened it again.

“But... the numbers. The spikes.”

“You have anxiety. Specifically, situational physiological anxiety with somatic symptoms and health hyperawareness.”

“That sounds very medical.”

“It means you’re smart, sensitive, and over-focused on your body’s dashboard.” Dr. Desai smiled.

Samar slumped back.

“So, nothing is wrong with me?”

“Not unless you want something to be wrong.”

Samar stared at the floor.

“...So this is it? You’re telling me I’ve spent 20 years panicking over nothing?”

“No,” said Dr. Desai, gently. “You’ve spent 20 years panicking over a fear that felt real. And that’s worth healing.”

Samar swallowed hard.

“Okay,” he whispered. “But what if I don’t know how to stop?”

The doctor paused.

“Then maybe,” he said, “you need to figure out what started it.”

Chapter 4 - The Girl Who Married a Billionaire

The walk home took him thirty minutes.

Not because the clinic was far.

But because his mind wandered in circles that his feet politely followed.

The wind was sharp but the sky was blue.

He didn't notice either.

Inside his apartment, the fridge hummed a low, lonely note.

He took off his hoodie, dropped it on the floor, then stood in the middle of the living room like he was waiting for instructions.

The BP machine on the counter beeped again.

He flipped it off. Literally.

Then, without quite deciding to, he walked to the hallway closet.

It was the one with the toolbox, expired granola bars, and a drawer labeled "Misc Sentimental Crap" in faded Sharpie.

He pulled it open.

Inside, there was a mess of old wires, train tickets, his college ID card from 2004 and under it all... a yellow envelope.

Unlabeled.

Slightly warped from monsoon moisture.

His hand hovered.

Then he picked it up.

Opened it.

It had a folded letter, addressed to Neha. A black-and-white photo of her taken during a college art exhibition and a pressed bougainvillea flower. Crushed flat. Colorless now. But still

intact.

He read the letter.

“Dear Neha,

This letter was written too late. Which is fitting, because that's how I lived around you — always slightly after the moment I should've acted.

I remember the day you showed me that first sketch — of the chaiwala, remember? I said it was 'nice.' I should've said it made me want to live slower, just so I could see things the way you do.

You were never loud. But you were clear. I didn't know how to speak clearly back then. I still don't, sometimes.

I don't know how to say any of this out loud because I'm always joking when I'm scared, and I'm always scared around you.

You are calm. And clever. And I don't just like you. I feel like you're a page someone tore out of a book I was trying to write about myself.

But I'm a coward. So this letter will rot in a drawer. Or you'll read it after I'm married to someone else who doesn't make me nervous. Either way, I hope you find someone who sees you exactly as you are.

And if you don't, maybe, just maybe I'll grow the courage to hand you this myself someday. And maybe this letter changes nothing. Maybe you never read it. But if you do... I hope you know that in one version of my life, I loved you quietly. And then one day, I stopped being quiet.

“Your's Sincerely,
Samar.”

His hand trembled slightly.

He hadn't read that in years.

He'd never sent it.

Because one month after writing it, he'd heard that Neha Wargantiwar had moved to London to study design.

And six years after that, a mutual friend posted her wedding photo on Instagram.

Neha looked elegant in a pastel lehenga, poised, smiling gently beside Manav Kapoor, the Mumbai startup prince who built an e-commerce empire and looked like he bench-pressed nonprofits for fun.

Samar remembered zooming in on the image, just to make sure it was really her.

It was.

The caption read:

“Two brilliant souls, one beautiful journey begins #WargantiwarToKapoorj #PowerCouple #LoveWins”

He had read it with the quiet horror of someone watching their life fold into a paper plane and drift toward someone else’s sky.

After that, Samar had stopped dating.

Not officially.

Not consciously.

But something inside him had shut like a shop during bandh.

He told people he was “focusing on career.”

He told himself he was “not in the right space emotionally.”

But the truth was simpler than all that.

He just couldn’t imagine loving someone the way he never got to love her.

He placed the letter back inside the envelope.

He didn’t seal it.

This time, he left it open on the table.

Like maybe, somehow, it could finish what he couldn’t.

Chapter 5 - The Box That Hummed

The rain had picked up, but Samar didn't feel it.

His umbrella remained folded in his hand like an unopened thought.

He was walking without direction , not toward the grocery store or back to the clinic, just... away.

Away from the photo.

Away from the letter.

Away from the impossible ache of a 20-year-old heartbreak that had matured like expensive, undrinkable wine.

He turned into an alley shortcut between a kombucha bar called The Fermentalist and a nail salon with a sign that blinked "10% Off Happy Nails" like it was short-circuiting joy.

That's when he saw the box.

It sat on the edge of the dumpster like someone had been about to throw it away but thought twice.

Maybe because it was humming.

Not loud. Just low.

Samar stopped.

It was matte black. About the size of a toaster oven. Covered in fine etchings , not letters, not symbols, just looping, elegant grooves. It looked like alien Sanskrit.

A faint blue glow pulsed from underneath.

He looked around.

Nobody.

No cameras.

No tech bro shouting, "Hey, that's my AI-powered Pandora Box!"

He crouched. Touched it.

It was warm.

He should've walked away.

Instead, he whispered, "What the hell are you?"

The box responded by clicking softly, as if unlocking.

A panel slid open with mechanical grace.

Inside it was a cracked digital screen, a rotary dial and what looked like an old USB port.

The screen flickered to life.

TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT MODULE — STANDBY

Samar blinked.

"No."

The box blinked back.

ENERGY SOURCE: INACTIVE

STABILIZER: DRIFTING

ENTER TEMPORAL COORDINATES

He laughed.

Not like someone who finds something funny.

Like someone who just hit rock bottom and discovered it was made of glitter.

He stood, looked around again, and muttered. "Either this is a government prank, or I'm about to be in a Netflix limited series called Time Guy With Trust Issues."

He picked it up.

It was surprisingly light.

He carried it home in both arms like a birthday cake he didn't ask for.

In the apartment, the rain picked up.

He set the box on the coffee table.

The screen still blinked gently.

TEMPORAL MODULE — STANDBY

He tapped the side. No response.

He pulled over his desk lamp and shined it inside the slot. Still no power source.

Out of curiosity and because he was a man who collected malfunctioning electronics like souvenirs of failure , he reached for the old BP machine.

Still leaking slightly from its battery compartment.

Still cursed.

He set it next to the box.

That's when the lights flickered.

The BP machine's display blinked 8888 — full overload.

The blue glow inside the box surged.

The circuits hissed softly. Somewhere, a relay clicked.

On the screen, new text appeared:

BIO-ELECTRICAL ENERGY SOURCE DETECTED

STABILIZER LOCKED

INITIATE TEMPORAL CORE CHARGE?

He stared.

Samar Arockiaraj, a man who had once thrown away a rice cooker for “being too smart,” now

stood before what appeared to be a time machine powered by cardiovascular anxiety.

And it was asking for permission.

Y/N?

He raised a trembling hand.

He pressed Y.

Chapter 6 - Crash Landing, Santacruz West

THWACK.

He hit the pavement like a dropped watermelon.

Face-first into a Mumbai monsoon puddle.

Water, mud, and philosophical regret shot up his nose.

He lay there for several seconds, blinking at a goat chewing a paper plate just two feet away.

“I’ve died,” Samar croaked. “This is karmic hell. Of course there are goats.”

He rolled onto his back and gasped. The sky above was slate gray. Rain poured down in steady sheets. The air smelled like fried vada, rubber slippers, and wet concrete.

Then he heard it, a bus honk, sharp and nostalgic.

The grumble of a Bajaj auto.

The screech of a paan-stained bus driver yelling, “Aage badho, bhai!”

He sat up.

Posters plastered on the walls advertised Rang De Basanti, Krackjack biscuits, and something called “SMS your Future!”

A collegeboy passed with a Nokia 1100 swinging from his belt like a badge of honor.

Samar squinted at a street sign.

Juhu Tara Road, Santacruz West.

He stood up so fast he slipped, hit the wall, and grabbed onto a rusting pipe.

“Okay,” he breathed. “This is happening. I’m here. I’m actually here.”

Mumbai, 2006. The monsoon. The month of the trauma. The clinic. The moment it all cracked.

And then.

There. Across the street.

Him.

Seventeen. Scrawny. Shuffling forward in a shirt two sizes too big. Holding a file labeled "Admission Fitness Certificate."

Young Samar.

Samar panicked.

He sprinted across the street with zero regard for traffic laws, slipped on a wet gutter lid, screamed, recovered, and ran up to his teenage self just as he reached the entrance to the building.

"WAIT!" he gasped.

Young Samar turned.

He blinked.

Then frowned.

"...Are you here to sell me broadband?"

Samar bent double, panting.

"No—I'm—you—you can't go up there."

"Why?"

"Because she's gonna say something. And it'll ruin you. Emotionally. For like, two decades."

Teen Samar stared.

"What?"

"She as in Doctor Kamath.. she's going to check your BP and say you're at risk of dying or something and then you'll spiral and ruin your dating life and develop a phobia of machines and...and... and you'll never tell Neha how you feel"

Young Samar narrowed his eyes. "Neha?"

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“You’re insane.”

“No—I’m you!” Samar blurted.

“Oh, great, my future is homeless.”

Samar looked down. Wet jeans. Bloodied elbow. No shoes.

“...Okay, fair.”

Young Samar stepped back.

“This is some prank, right? Like that MTV Bakra show?”

“Dude, listen to me. I know everything. I know what you’re carrying in that plastic file—your tenth standard mark sheet, two passport photos, and a medical form from ‘Maharashtra State Junior College of Science.’”

Young Samar hesitated.

“...Lucky guess.”

“You used your sister’s deodorant this morning.”

“Everyone in this house uses that.”

“You cried during Main Hoon Na.”

“Shut up.”

“You still check your armpits for tumors every two days because of one Discovery Channel documentary.”

Young Samar’s face paled.

“...Okay, what the fuckkkk”

“I’m you,” Older Samar said, straightening up. “From 2026.”

“You don’t look like the future. You look like… a tired sales rep who eats his feelings.”

“That’s accurate.”

Young Samar tilted his head.

“Prove it.”

Samar paused.

Then whispered something in his ear.

Young Samar’s face twisted in disgust.

“Bro. Nobody knows that.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s messed up.”

“I’m messed up.”

They stood there, both versions of the same man, staring at each other under the dripping cement awning.

Young Samar shook his head.

“So… what do you want?”

“I want you to not go in there.”

“Why?”

“Because the BP machine will read high. Because Doctor Kamath will say something casual and terrifying. And because you’ll believe her like she’s Moses. And then you’ll spiral for twenty years.”

Young Samar eyed the stairwell.

“…Is that why we’re like this?”

“That, and unresolved feelings for a girl you’re about to meet and immediately fall for.”

“Wait. A girl?”

“Neha.”

Young Samar paused.

“Is she hot?”

“She’s... poetry. And way out of your league.”

Young Samar grinned. “Nice.”

Older Samar snapped his fingers.

“Don’t get distracted. I’m serious. You can stop this. Just... don’t go today. Tell Mom you were sick. Reschedule. Or better don’t go”

Young Samar frowned.

“...Will that change everything?”

Older Samar shrugged.

“I don’t know. But it’s a start.”

They stood in silence.

Then Younger Samar smirked.

“So you’re from the future. Do we have flying cars yet?”

“No.”

“Teleportation?”

“No.”

“At least tell me we marry Neha.”

Older Samar looked away.

Young Samar noticed.

“...We don’t?”

There was a beat.

Then the older version said, softly:

“No”

“At least we are married to some woman?” Younger Samar asked.

“Naa”

“Dude. Seriously” Younger Samar said with a disappointed face.

Chapter 7 - Don't Trust the BP Machine

Young Samar stared at his older self like he was trying to decipher a bootleg sci-fi DVD.

"You know what?" he said finally. "Fine. Let's say I believe you. Let's say this isn't just the result of drinking too much Frooti and falling into a coma."

"Good start."

"But let's say I do not go upstairs to that evil clinic. Then what? You magically stop being a neurotic, emotionally constipated loner?"

"I'm emotionally cautious," Older Samar said.

"You were crying next to a goat."

"That was situational."

"You smelled like a garbage bag of trauma."

"Okay fine.. let's stay on topic."

They stepped out from the awning and into the drizzle, walking side by side toward the chai stall near the bus stop, the unofficial therapy couch of Santacruz West.

Young Samar bought two cutting chais (he paid because Older Samar had only wet cash from the future and a maxed-out credit card).

They sipped in silence.

Finally, the younger one said, "So what's the deal with this Neha girl? You said I will meet her soon?"

"Yes," said Older Samar. "In... about forty minutes."

"That's specific."

"You're at the admissions desk. She walks in wearing a green kurti and sketching on a tiny spiral pad. She's transferring from a college in Pune. You try to be charming. You fail."

Young Samar grinned.

“Sounds about right.”

“She’s smart. And sharp. And quiet in a way that makes you want to impress her without knowing why.”

“Is she into physics?”

“She’s into charcoal sketching and pretending not to care about physics.”

“Does she talk to me?”

“Naa.”

Young Samar’s eyebrows lifted. “Okay.”

Older Samar shook his head. “It’s not romantic yet. You fumble. You flirt like a boy trying to recite poetry off a calculator. And then you never tell her how you feel.”

Young Samar frowned.

“Why?”

“Because you think there’s always more time.”

“...Damn. That was deep.”

Older Samar sipped his chai.

“And then she marries someone else.”

Young Samar froze mid-sip.

“What?”

“Yep. Some tech guy. Big-shot e-commerce tycoon. Went viral once for feeding stray dogs during a shareholder meeting.”

“Ew.”

“She looked happy.”

Young Samar stared into the rain.

“...So this is what heartbreak looks like? A wet chai glass and adult-onset anxiety?”

Older Samar sighed. “That, and owning a juicer you never use.”

They finished their chai.

Young Samar took the empty glasses to the counter, like he always did.

When he came back, he said:

“Okay. Let’s say I don’t go see the doctor today. No BP trauma. No white-coat phobia. I rewrite the script.”

“Exactly.”

“And this Neha girl — I just... talk to her?”

“Talk to her.”

“You said I fumble.”

“Try not to.”

“Got any tips?”

Older Samar pulled a piece of crumpled paper from his pocket — the corner of a letter. The one he’d written in 2006 but never sent.

He hesitated.

Then handed it over.

Young Samar read it. Twice.

He looked up.

“...This is weirdly poetic for someone who almost fainted ordering pav bhaji.”

“I had food poisoning.”

“You cried.”

“Different issue.”

Young Samar folded the note and slipped it into his back pocket.

Then he grinned.

“You know what? I am going to talk to her.”

Older Samar blinked.

“You are?”

“Yeah. Why should you get all the character growth? You clearly messed it up the first time. I might be the better version.”

Older Samar frowned.

“I can still beat you at Wordle.”

Young Samar smirked.

“I don’t know what that is. But I’m still cooler than you.”

He stood, brushed off his damp shirt , and looked toward the college gates down the road.

“You coming?” he asked.

Older Samar shook his head.

“I’ve got to stay hidden. Timeline integrity.”

Young Samar rolled his eyes.

“Whatever, MCU.”

He turned and walked away.

At the corner, he turned back.

“You sure she’s wearing green?”

“Positive.”

“You sure this works?”

“I don’t know. But it’s worth trying.”

Young Samar gave a mock salute and disappeared into the monsoon mist.

Older Samar exhaled.

Then whispered:

“...Please don’t mess this up.”

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Chapter 8 - First Sighting: Neha in Charcoal

The college looked exactly as he remembered it.

Older Samar crouched behind a half-broken compound wall across the street, where time had peeled the paint but preserved the smell: chalk dust, sweat, photocopier ink, and fried samosas from the canteen.

A torn vinyl banner hung over the gate:

“ADMISSIONS OPEN – Maharashtra State Jr. College (Science + Commerce)”

A scooter zipped past. The rider wore a helmet, but the pillion didn’t.

He spotted Young Samar lingering near the front desk window, pretending to be fascinated by the notice board while periodically checking his reflection in a cracked glass panel.

Older Samar winced.

Stop touching your hair, you insecure squirrel. Let the moment come to you.

And then—it did.

She walked in from the opposite side, holding an umbrella with a missing spike, the kind that always tilted slightly in one direction like it had a personal vendetta against left shoulders.

Green kurti.

Long black hair, damp from the rain.

A canvas tote bag with charcoal fingerprints.

And in her hand—yes. The sketchpad.

Older Samar’s chest locked.

There you are.

Neha Wargantiwar.

Seventeen. But with that same unnerving quiet.

The kind that made people talk too much around her, just to fill the silence.

She wasn't trying to be mysterious.

She simply wasn't trying.

She walked up to the front desk, nodded politely to the clerk, then leaned slightly against the pillar and opened her sketchbook.

Young Samar glanced over. He blinked twice. Adjusted his posture.

He glanced at Older Samar's hiding spot, invisible to everyone else.

Then took a deep breath and stepped forward.

From his vantage point, Older Samar could barely hear anything over the rain and his own thumping heart.

But he could see it all.

Young Samar hovered awkwardly beside her, glanced at her sketchpad, and said something. Probably something horrible.

She looked up.

Eyebrows raised.

A half-smile. Slightly confused. Not quite amused.

Then she said something back.

Whatever it was, it froze Young Samar. He scratched the back of his neck. Tried again. She responded with what could only be interpreted as... light mocking.

Older Samar grinned.

There it is.

He crouched lower, pressing himself against the cold wall, ignoring the puddle creeping into his sock.

He didn't care.

Because he was watching the impossible:

The first moment. Again.

The start of the story.

The sketchbook.

The green kurti.

The quiet girl who wouldn't let go of his imagination for twenty years.

He felt the weight of the last version of his life—lonely meals, BP panic, and silence. Like the timeline was slowly rebalancing its spine.

Across the street, Neha tucked her hair behind her ear.

Young Samar looked smitten already.

And for once?

That wasn't a bad thing.

Chapter 9 - Shivram and a Disguise Crisis

There comes a moment in every time travel narrative when the protagonist must accept a bitter truth:

You cannot crouch behind a wall forever.

Not because it's uncomfortable.

Not because the ants have started investigating your socks.

But because a middle-aged man loitering outside a junior college during college hours is, in any timeline, deeply suspicious and creepy.

Samar peeked over the compound wall again.

Young Samar and Neha had wandered inside the building — she was carrying a file now, he was doing the walk that said, “I don’t care about you but please look at me.”

He needed a way in.

You can’t follow them in dressed like a soaked pedestrian from the future, he told himself.

You’ll either be arrested or sent to a mental hospital.

That’s when he spotted it.

A rusted door around the back of the building — slightly ajar.

He crept toward it, feet slapping in puddles.

Inside: a cramped storage room full of discarded uniforms, broken desks, rusting fans, and a faded poster that read:

“RESPECT YOUR MONITOR!”

On a hook in the corner hung a spare college peon’s uniform — a grey shirt, black pants, and a name badge that said “SHIVRAM.”

Samar grinned.

Perfect.

Five minutes later, he emerged from the storeroom looking like a man who'd just time-traveled and fixed a Xerox machine.

The pants were too short. The shirt was too tight. The name badge hung lopsided.

He had tied a red cotton rag around his neck for authenticity.

“Okay,” he muttered. “Operation Blend In.”

He walked through the college gate.

Nobody looked twice.

Mumbai Rule #27: If you walk with enough fake confidence, no one stops you.

Inside, he wandered the corridor, eyes scanning.

Classrooms buzzed with teenage chaos. A girl was being yelled at for wearing eyeliner. A boy tried to hide an entire vada pav under his shirt. Some things never changed.

And then.

He spotted them.

Young Samar and Neha, sitting on the stone bench outside the office, talking.

Talking.

She was sketching something.

His younger self was looking at it, nodding like he understood shading and line work, which was a hilarious lie.

Stay calm, Older Samar told himself. Observe. Guide. Do not interfere unless absolutely necessary.

Then he tripped over a mop bucket.

Water sloshed across the floor.

A passing science teacher turned.

“Shivram! Kya kar rahe ho?!” She didn’t recognize that it was not Shivram.

Samar blinked.

“Oh—I—mopping?”

“You call this mopping?! Don’t make me call the principal. Clean this right now!”

“Yes, madam.”

The teacher glared, then walked off in a hurry.

Samar crouched and started wiping water with his rag.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Neha glance over.

Then she said something to Young Samar.

Then both of them looked at him.

He froze.

Please don’t recognize me, please don’t recognize me, I’m just Shivram the mildly incompetent peon, I clean things, I blend in, I am background

Young Samar squinted.

The Older version looked down.

Sweat trickled behind his ear.

Timeline integrity. Timeline integrity. Timeline—

“Excuse me?” Neha said, standing.

Older Samar nearly dropped the rag.

She was talking to him.

“No. No. This is not the plan. You were not supposed to speak to me until much later in this reboot. I’m not ready. I’m Shivram right now. I am the mop. Be the mop.” Samar thought.

She pointed to her sketchpad.

“Do you have a tissue?”

He blinked.

“Oh. Uh. Yes. Sorry. Water damage.”

He handed her a handkerchief.

She nodded. “Thanks.”

She looked at him again, puzzled.

“Have we met before?”

Samar’s brain stuttered.

Don’t say anything stupid.

“No,” he said. “You must be confusing me with someone who looks useful.”

She laughed. Just once. A small, surprised laugh.

Then turned back to her sketchpad.

Older Samar stood there for a second too long.

Then turned away, heart racing.

He didn’t know what she’d drawn.

He didn’t care.

That single laugh was already more than he’d heard in the last lifetime.

Chapter 10 - Self vs. Self

Young Samar shoved open the door to the old AV storeroom with a smirk.

“Peon disguise? Really?”

Older Samar sat on a stack of broken desks, still wearing the name badge that said SHIVRAM, now half-detached and barely clinging to his shirt.

“You try blending into your past with a receding hairline and future trauma.”

“I’m seventeen. My hairline is invincible.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts.”

They stared at each other for a moment — the same mouth, same eyes, same nervous habit of cracking knuckles out of sync.

And then, the younger one burst out:

“Okay. That was her. That was her. Neha. The green kurti. The sketchpad. You weren’t kidding.”

“I never kid about emotional milestones.”

“She asked me what I thought of her drawing.”

“What did you say?”

“I said it looked ‘nice.’”

“...You absolute amateur.”

“She caught me off guard!”

Older Samar rubbed his face. “Okay. This is salvageable. But we need a plan.”

“You mean a love plan.”

“I mean a life plan. We’re fixing two things here: one, your irrational lifelong fear of BP monitors; and two, your inability to talk to women you genuinely care about.”

They both sighed.

Older Samar reached into his pocket, pulled out a small notebook — soggy from the time jump but still legible. He flipped it open.

“What’s that?”

“Things I wish I had done differently.”

“Wow. You made a list?”

“You’ll understand one day. Around 28, you start organizing your regrets alphabetically.”

Young Samar peered at the page.

1. Tell her.

2. Don’t listen to Dr. Kamath.

3. Laugh more.

4. Stop Googling symptoms.

5. Eat less instant noodles.

6. Start therapy.

7. Hug mom more.

He looked up.

“You’re kind of a loser.”

“I told you.”

They both laughed again. It was weird. Disorienting. But weirdly comforting like meeting your own reflection and realizing it talks back.

Young Samar grew quiet.

“So... what’s next?”

Older Samar leaned forward.

“She’s going to start classes here next week. You’ll sit near her in biology. She’ll borrow your eraser and never give it back.”

“Hot.”

“She’ll draw you once. You’ll find it folded into your chemistry notes. You’ll keep it.”

“...And then?”

“You’ll keep it forever. And still never say anything.”

A beat.

Young Samar swallowed hard.

“Yeah. We’re not doing that version.”

“Good.”

“So how do we do this version?”

Older Samar looked him dead in the eye.

“You talk to her. Day by day. Honestly. No lines. No posturing. No pretending to like poetry.”

“But I do like—”

“No, you don’t.”

Young Samar shrugged.

Fair.

“And,” Older Samar added, “you stay away from the BP machine. Tell Mom you’ll reschedule the medical check. Say you had a cold.”

“You want me to lie to Mom?”

“I want you to save yourself.”

Young Samar considered this.

“...Fair.”

“So then... When do you disappear? Like in the movies? Do you just... blink out once the timeline starts fixing?”

“I have no idea.”

“Wait, what?”

“This isn’t Interstellar, bro. I don’t have a manual. I got zapped by a time machine powered by BP monitor leakage.”

Young Samar snorted.

They both stood.

Young Samar looked at the door.

Then at his older self.

“Thanks,” he said.

Older Samar nodded. “Go live. Don’t overthink it.”

“I’m seventeen. Overthinking is living.”

As he reached the door, he paused.

“Oh—and one more thing,” he said.

“What?”

“You really don’t marry her in the future?”

Older Samar smiled.

“Not yet.”

Chapter 11 - The Plan

The next morning, they met behind the chemistry lab like fugitives from an overfunded tuition class.

Older Samar stood in his peon uniform, one sleeve rolled up, using a busted compass as a pointer and a whiteboard marker on a dusty blackboard that hadn't been used since the Vajpayee administration.

Young Samar, freshly showered and wearing too much deodorant, stood holding a notebook labeled:

OPERATION: NOT A LOSER

"Alright," said Older Samar. "First rule of talking to Neha: Do not try to impress her."

"Okay," said Young Samar, writing it down.

"Second rule: Don't mention your science fair volcano from last year."

"But it had actual smoke—"

"She will mock you."

"Copy that."

"Third rule: Don't try to sound cool. Just sound present. She likes people who notice things."

Young Samar raised a hand.

"Yes?"

"What if I compare her eyes to... like... a charcoal eclipse?"

Older Samar closed his.

"No metaphors please."

"Damn."

"No filmy lines."

“So no ‘kya tum pain ho, jo main feel kar raha hoon?’”

“Especially not that.”

Young Samar flipped to a fresh page.

“What should I say?”

“Ask about her art. Be curious, not clever.”

“You mean... like, ‘So what kind of pencils do you use?’”

Older Samar considered it.

“...Less creepy.”

Young Samar nodded solemnly.

“Got it.”

Older Samar drew a diagram of a conversation flowchart.

It had arrows pointing from “Ask a real question” to “Listen like a human” to “Do not interrupt with weird jokes about ligaments.”

“What if she asks me something back?” Young Samar said.

“Answer like you’re not auditioning for Roadies.”

Young Samar paused.

“...Do we make her laugh?”

Older Samar smiled. “She laughs when she doesn’t expect to. Not when you force it.”

Young Samar looked thoughtful.

Then: “Okay. I’ll try during my lunch break.”

Older Samar put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t try. Just... show up. Be real. And maybe keep your legs uncrossed like a functioning vertebrate.”

“Harsh but fair.”

They stood there for a second.

Then Young Samar asked, more quietly:

“...Do we ever tell her how we feel?”

Older Samar looked away.

“You’re about to find out.”

Perfect. Now let’s step into the emotional minefield that is a teenage group project, where awkward crushes go to die—or become legend.

This is Young Samar’s first real attempt at talking to Neha. Older Samar is eavesdropping nearby. The stakes are tiny, but they feel world-ending.

Chapter 12 - The Interrogation Scene

Biology class was a war zone of bunsen burners, moldy textbooks, and teenage chemistry that had nothing to do with atoms.

Today's assignment: build a model of a DNA helix out of paper spirals and straws that would be forgotten forever the moment exams ended.

Four students to a group.

And by some silent miracle—one that neither Samar fully understood. Young Samar and Neha had been paired together along with two guys.

Young Samar tried to act casual.

He sat down beside her.

She didn't look up.

She was already folding the base spiral.

He cleared his throat.

"Hey."

She looked up.

Nodded once. "Hi."

He fumbled for something clever.

Nothing arrived.

So he pointed at the straw in her hand and said, "You... spiral really well."

Neha blinked.

"Thanks," she said. "I've been practicing spiral excellence since childhood."

Young Samar chuckled nervously. "So. Um. You're from Nagpur, right?"

"Yup."

“What made you switch colleges?”

“My father got transferred.”

“Ah, the classic middle-class plot twist.”

She smiled faintly.

He continued, flailing now.

“So... are you more of a nucleus or mitochondria kind of person?”

She turned her head slowly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Like. If you had to choose. You know. Between being the brain of the cell or the powerhouse.”

She stared at him.

Then said:

“You’re not good at small talk, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Good.”

She went back to folding.

Young Samar sat there, blinking.

Wait, did she just... approve that?

He tried again.

“So, what do you draw? Like, people? Landscapes?”

Neha paused.

Then flipped open a page of her sketchpad and handed it to him.

It was a quick charcoal drawing—rough lines, bold contrast, messy and alive.

It was the chaiwala outside the gate. The exact expression. The curved elbow. Even the spilled tea.

He stared at it.

“This is really good.”

“No metaphor?” He said to himself again and again, “No metaphor.”

She nodded. “Okay. You can stay.”

Oh my God. I’ve been admitted to her table. I’ve been given a clearance.

From outside the biology lab window, Older Samar leaned against the wall, arms crossed, trying not to cry.

This was the moment. It was working.

Until—

A voice behind him.

“Shivram! Kya kar rahe ho idhar?”

The lab assistant.

Older Samar jumped. “Uh, water damage inspection.”

“In the biology lab?”

“Yes. Frogs. Humidity.”

The man squinted. “You’re not Shivram. You don’t even have a moustache.”

Older Samar turned and ran.

Back in the lab, Young Samar flipped the page of Neha’s sketchpad again.

This time, it was a self-portrait.

Rough, but intimate. Big eyes. Closed lips. Ears a bit too small.

“You don’t show people these, do you?” he said.

She looked at him. Unblinking.

“Nope.”

“But you’re showing me.”

She shrugged. “You’re the only one who asked.”

His heart did that weird thing again.

That popcorn-in-the-microwave feeling.

Just about to burst.

Chapter 13 - Operation Note Pass

“So just to be clear,” said Young Samar, whispering from the empty AV room during the lunch break, “this worked for you in your timeline?”

Older Samar scoffed.

“I didn’t have a plan in my timeline. I panicked for two years and then moved to America. This is already more effort than I ever made.”

Young Samar blinked. “Wait—you literally ran away?”

“Technically, I got a scholarship. Emotionally, yes, I ran away.”

They sat cross-legged on the floor, a tattered wooden bench between them like a war table.

On it lay: A sheet of ruled notebook paper, One leaking Cello Gripper pen and a half-eaten samosa

Older Samar tapped the page.

“We keep it simple. No big declarations. No metaphors. Just a small acknowledgment that she made you feel something. A moment of recognition.”

“Like... a human postcard.”

“Exactly.”

Young Samar cracked his knuckles. “Okay. Something honest.”

He wrote.

Older Samar peeked.

“Hey. That sketch you showed me? It stayed in my head longer than it had to. Thought you should know.”

They both stared at it.

Older Samar said softly: “That’s... actually perfect.”

Young Samar grinned.

“Okay. Now what?”

“Slip it into her notebook during history. You sit behind her, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Just pass it forward like you’re handing her the homework.”

Young Samar nodded, folding the note like it was a ceremonial offering.

Later — History Class

Fan whirring. Pages turning. A teacher dictating something about the 1857 revolt with the enthusiasm of a sedated turtle.

Young Samar sat exactly one seat behind her.

He timed it perfectly.

She reached for her ruler.

He slid the note under her notebook and tapped her shoulder.

She looked back.

Raised an eyebrow.

He gave the universal teenage gesture for “this is nothing important, please pretend like it’s normal.”

She took it.

Unfolded it.

Read it.

And just as she looked back at him with the faintest—faintest—hint of a smile...

The teacher said, “Neha Wargantiwar, is that a chit?”

The entire class turned.

Time froze.

Neha, mortified, tried to fold it closed.

Too late.

“Bring it here.”

Young Samar’s soul exited his body and took a rickshaw to another dimension.

She walked to the front. Note in hand. Gaze set to not mess with me.

The teacher took it, adjusted his glasses, and read aloud:

“Hey. That sketch you showed me? It stayed in my head longer than it had to. Thought you should know.”

A few boys in the back went ooooooohhh.

Someone whistled.

Neha turned. Looked directly at Young Samar.

He braced for death.

But her face was unreadable.

The teacher handed the note back with a sigh.

“Keep your art thoughts for after class.”

She returned to her seat.

Did not speak.

Did not pass another note.

Did not smile.

Young Samar stared at the back of her head for the next twenty minutes like a man staring into the final moments of his dignity.

Back in the AV room, after class.

“I’m never listening to you again,” he said, pacing.

Older Samar looked stunned. “How was I supposed to know this teacher would read it out loud?! No one ever reads it out loud!”

“She read it. Out loud. In front of everyone.”

“It was a good note!”

“It was the worst day of my life!”

“It’s not even in the top ten. Trust me.”

“You ruined everything!”

“She didn’t crumple it.”

Young Samar paused.

“...What?”

“She didn’t throw it away. Or tear it. Or laugh.”

Young Samar sat down again.

“Do you think... that’s good?”

“I think that’s something.”

A long silence passed.

Then Young Samar said:

“...So what now?”

Older Samar grinned.

“Now we spill something.”

Chapter 14 - Spill, Sketch, Repeat

Fate chose the art room for the next incident.

A space that always smelled like wet paper, Fevicol, and ambition.

It was the last period. The rain outside had settled into a low, steady hiss, and the fans inside clanked like dying robots.

The teacher had left students to “explore form and shadow,” which in most cases meant wasting time and smudging things on purpose.

Neha was seated near the window, sketchpad out, a bottle of black ink perched beside her like a dare.

Young Samar walked in late, hair damp, nerves shot, dignity missing in action.

He spotted her immediately.

She was sketching again—something abstract. Curved lines. Sharp corners. A tangle of expression.

He took the seat next to her without asking.

She looked up.

No smile.

But no frown either.

Just: “You’ve recovered from your literary debut?”

He nearly died on the spot.

“I’d like to issue a formal apology to the 1857 revolt for interrupting its lecture with my emotional baggage.”

Her eyebrow twitched. The faintest glimmer of amusement.

“I wasn’t expecting that note,” she said.

“I wasn’t expecting to survive it.”

Pause.

“...Did you mean it?” she asked.

His throat went dry.

He looked at her, suddenly aware that this was a real moment. Not a joke. Not a strategy. Not a stunt pulled off with help from his older self hiding in a broom closet.

Just a girl.

Asking for honesty.

“I did,” he said.

She looked at him for a second too long.

Then nodded.

And went back to sketching.

A quiet fell between them.

Not awkward.

Just... possible.

Samar exhaled.

Then his elbow nudged the table.

And the ink bottle tipped.

GLUKK.

Black liquid spread like a panic attack across her page.

It bled into the lines, consuming the image. An accidental eclipse.

“Oh my God—oh my God—I’m—”

He grabbed tissues from his bag, trying to blot, wipe, fix—

She raised her hand. Calm.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not! That was beautiful. And now it’s just—just”

She looked at it.

Then tilted her head.

And said:

“...Better, actually.”

He froze.

“What?”

She rotated the sketchpad slightly.

Now the black spill had swallowed part of the image, but it left behind a strange, moody smear. It turned her drawing into something messier, more alive.

She dipped her brush into the spilled ink and dragged a line outward, adding to it.

Transforming it.

“See?” she said softly.

“Accidents are just... edits we didn’t plan for.”

He blinked.

“That’s the most profound thing anyone has said to me since I stopped watching Small Wonder.”

She smiled.

Really smiled.

He stared.

Then:

“I’ll buy you a new bottle.”

She shook her head. “Don’t. It won’t spill the same way.”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

So he just sat.

And watched.

While she kept drawing.

And the silence between them turned into something else entirely.

Chapter15 - The First Glitch

The rain had stopped.

And for the first time since arriving in 2006, Samar felt... still.

He lay curled under a dusty curtain in the AV room storeroom—his makeshift hideout—wearing Shivram's wrinkled uniform, the shirt now loose from days of being slept in.

A half-eaten bun maska sat beside him on a newspaper. A flask of chai gone cold.

There was a kind of peace in it.

He'd seen her laugh. He'd seen himself speak without flinching.

He'd felt the difference, small but seismic.

Like the axis had tilted 0.5 degrees toward the life he was meant to have.

And then—

The lightbulb above him flickered.

Once.

Then again. Like a spasm.

Samar sat up, blinking.

He reached for his bag, but his hand—

It passed through it.

Not fully. Just for a second. Like a glitch in a video game.

He snatched his arm back.

Stared at his hand.

Nothing unusual now. Solid. Shaky. Real.

He looked at the desk.

His wristwatch lay there.

A Casio digital, bought in Charlotte. It had been blank since he landed here.

Now?

It was moving.

Fast.

The seconds spun backward.

21:05 → 21:04 → 21:03 → 21:02

Then it stuttered.

Skipped.

Started again.

His skin crawled.

“Okay,” he whispered. “Okay. No need to panic. It’s just... time reminding me I cheated.”

He stood up.

The floor creaked.

But not like normal wood.

It echoed strangely—like the sound came half a second after the step.

It’s starting. I’m not meant to be here this long.

He pulled open his bag, rummaged until he found the letter. The one. The one he’d never sent. The one he kept like a scar.

He stared at it.

Then folded it carefully, slid it into an envelope, and wrote across it in bold pen:

FOR: SAMAR (You. Me. Us.)

OPEN WHEN YOU'RE ABOUT TO CHICKEN OUT

And just below that:

P.S. If you ignore this letter I swear I will invent time travel again just to smack you.

He smiled, despite everything.

But as he turned toward the door.

The walls shimmered.

Just for a second.

The window stretched—like a heat haze on asphalt—then snapped back.

His reflection in the glass stuttered. Blinked in and out.

And somewhere far away, a sound like a camera shutter click echoed across his bones.

It was starting.

He didn't have much time.

Chapter16 - The Last Day

Recess. Wednesday.

Students buzzed across the quad like cockroaches after a power cut. Samosa wrappers flew through the air. Someone was beatboxing badly near the washrooms. Cricket balls shot past unaware heads.

And near the back gate, under the banyan tree, sat Young Samar, alone, chewing on a Melody chocolate and scribbling something on the back of his history worksheet.

He didn't look up when a shadow fell across him.

"Let me guess," he said. "You time-traveled into my lunch break to criticize my posture."

Older Samar dropped beside him on the stone bench, still in his peon disguise, panting lightly.

"I'm leaving," he said.

Young Samar blinked. "What, now?"

"Soon. Hours. Maybe less."

"Because?"

"Because time travel is not a hotel booking. It doesn't care how well things are going."

Young Samar turned to him. "You're glitching."

"My hand phased through a desk this morning."

"That's horrifying."

"Also my voice echoed before I spoke."

"...That's horrifying and kind of awesome."

Older Samar smiled, but only a little.

"I came to tell you... this is the handoff."

Young Samar frowned.

“What, like a baton?”

“Like a life.”

They sat in silence.

A boy ran past yelling about someone stealing his compass box. A dog barked in the distance. The bell rang faintly across the courtyard.

Young Samar unwrapped another Melody. Offered it.

Older Samar took it.

“You seriously didn’t marry her in your version?”

“No.”

“Because of the BP thing?”

“Partly. But also because I just... waited. Too long. I thought there’d always be a better time.”

Young Samar nodded slowly.

“I do that too.”

“I know you do.”

More silence.

Then: “How long did we wait?”

Older Samar took a breath.

“She got married when we were twenty-seven. Moved to Bangalore. You sent her a message once. She didn’t reply. Then you stopped trying.”

Young Samar looked away.

Older Samar added gently:

“And then she had a baby. And you sat in your apartment in Charlotte eating frozen parathas and crying over her Instagram stories.”

Young Samar flinched. "Oof."

"It wasn't our finest era."

They sat with that for a while.

Then:

"...What do I do now?" Young Samar asked.

Older Samar pulled the envelope from his pocket and handed it over.

"This is the letter I never gave her. Use it. Or don't. Write your own. Say it better. Say it sooner."

Young Samar turned it over in his hands. Read the front.

FOR: SAMAR (You. Me. Us.)

"Is this like a time bomb?" he asked.

"It's like a spine. In paper form."

They both laughed. But only a little.

Older Samar stood.

His hand flickered again—briefly transparent, then back.

Young Samar saw it.

His face changed.

"Hey..."

Older Samar met his eyes.

"No crying," he said. "I'm still you. We don't cry until after the bill comes."

Young Samar smiled.

But something behind it trembled.

“I don’t want to mess this up,” he said.

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do,” Older Samar said, and stepped back into the banyan’s shade.

Then added:

“You’re already different.”

And just like that—

He was gone.

Chapter 17 - The Letter and the Promise

The banyan tree rustled overhead, its roots curling down like tangled thoughts.

Young Samar sat alone on the bench, fingers curled around the envelope.

The world moved on around him — laughter, footsteps, bells, shouting.

But inside that moment?

It was just him.

And the letter.

He peeled the flap open.

The paper inside had been folded and unfolded so many times it felt soft, worn. There were creases at the corners. One tiny smudge where a drop of something — maybe tea, maybe a tear — had blurred the ink.

He hesitated.

Then began to read.

“Dear Neha,

This letter was written too late. Which is fitting, because that’s how I lived around you — always slightly after the moment I should’ve acted.

I remember the day you showed me that first sketch — of the chaiwala, remember? I said it was ‘nice.’ I should’ve said it made me want to live slower, just so I could see things the way you do.

You were never loud. But you were clear. I didn’t know how to speak clearly back then. I still don’t, sometimes.

I don’t know how to say any of this out loud because I’m always joking when I’m scared, and I’m always scared around you.

You are calm. And clever. And I don’t just like you. I feel like you’re a page someone tore out of a book I was trying to write about myself.

But I’m a coward. So this letter will rot in a drawer. Or you’ll read it after I’m married to someone else who doesn’t make me nervous. Either way, I hope you find someone who sees you exactly

as you are.

And if you don't, maybe , just maybe I'll grow the courage to hand you this myself someday. And maybe this letter changes nothing. Maybe you never read it. But if you do... I hope you know that in one version of my life, I loved you quietly. And then one day, I stopped being quiet.

Yours Sincerely,
Samar."

Young Samar sat still for a long time after.

It wasn't the sadness that hit hardest.

It was missed. The almost. The silent grief of a life unliv.

He folded the letter back, slowly.

Then reached into his bag.

Pulled out a fresh page from his notebook.

And began writing.

Not a love letter.

Not yet.

Just a sentence.

A beginning.

"Hi Neha. I have something I want to say before I forget how."

He didn't know what the ending would be.

But he'd started.

And this time?

He was on time.

Chapter 18 - The Pullback

Santacruz West, back corridor of the college.

Older Samar stood outside the art room, clutching a cracked Thermos of sweetened tea and watching the moment unfold.

Inside, through the dusty glass panel, he saw them:

Young Samar, standing at her desk, paper in hand.

Neha, looking up at him, brow slightly furrowed — curious, guarded, listening.

It was working.

The universe, unbelievably, was listening.

And then the hallway lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then buzzed violently.

The air rippled like heat on concrete. A tremor passed through the floorboards.

A kid passing by dropped his backpack and looked around like he'd just heard the college say "get out."

Samar gripped the wall.

His hand disappeared up to the wrist.

He gasped.

"Not yet. Not now. Five more minutes—"

His foot glitched through the tiles. He stumbled. His voice echoed before it left his mouth.

And then..

The world cracked.

Like a film reel tearing.

He saw flashes:

*Neha's laugh.

His apartment in Charlotte.

A child's voice yelling "Appa!"

His BP monitor flashing 152/90.

A tiny pair of shoes in a hallway.

A warm kitchen. Her hands on his face.

Then.

Pull.

Like gravity on caffeine. Like being reeled in by a fishing line tied to the soul.

He screamed without sound. Reached for the art room door.

And just before he vanished, he saw it:

Young Samar holding out the note.

And Neha ..

Smiling.

Small.

Sincere.

Present.

Then

Blackness.

THWUMP.

He landed flat on his living room floor.

Charlotte.

Lights buzzing.

Monitor beeping softly in the background.

He blinked.

The time machine box sat on the table beside him — dark now. Quiet.

And from the kitchen—

A voice.

Soft. Familiar.

Indian.

Tired and lovely.

> “Samar? Are you okay?”

He turned.

There she was.

Neha.

Thirty-seven. Hair tied back. Holding a dish towel. Wearing an oversized T-shirt with a faded Dil Chahta Hai print.

She looked at him with a frown forming.

But before she could ask again.

From the hallway:

A tiny voice.

Sleepy.

High-pitched.

> “Appa?”

Samar’s breath caught.

He turned fully.

A small girl in pink pajamas stood at the doorway, rubbing her eyes.

She ran forward and hugged his leg.

“I had a scary dream.”

He dropped to his knees.

Held her tight.

Didn’t speak.

Couldn’t.

Neha stepped closer. “You’re sweating,” she said, touching his forehead. “Did you nap on the floor?”

He looked at her.

Really looked.

Same eyes.

Same quiet.

But no sketchbook this time.

No silence between them.

Just space

His voice finally came.

“I’m fine,” he whispered. “I think... I just came back from somewhere.”

She smiled, not fully understanding.

But maybe part of her did.

She leaned in. Kissed his cheek.

“Dinner’s almost ready. Don’t forget your BP meds.”

He laughed, choking on it.

“Of course not.”

Chapter 19 - Familiar Strangers

Morning sunlight in Charlotte always looked a little tired, like it had stopped by reluctantly on its way to somewhere else.

It poured through the bedroom blinds in soft lines across the hardwood floor.

Samar sat at the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, staring at his own reflection in the full-length mirror.

The Shivram uniform was gone.

In its place: a maroon T-shirt that said World's Okayest Programmer, a gift, clearly, from someone who understood him too well.

Behind him, the bed was rumpled, warm.

A toothbrush sat in a cup on the dresser beside another toothbrush — pink-handled, slightly chewed on the side.

His eyes drifted to the nightstand.

A sketchpad.

He didn't touch it.

Not yet.

From the hallway: small footsteps.

A door creaked.

Then ...a voice. Groggy. Child-sized.

“Appa. Mumma said you’re snoring like Ajeet uncle’s tractor again.”

Samar turned just in time to see her.

Tiny. Curly-haired. Padding in on socked feet. Holding a stuffed rabbit by the ear and blinking like she hadn’t decided whether to be adorable or dramatic yet.

“G’morning,” she muttered, climbing onto his knee like it was routine.

It probably was.

He just wasn't used to it.

She's real. She's ours.

He blinked fast.

"Did I really sound like a tractor?" he asked, voice cracking just a bit.

She nodded solemnly. "But a nice one."

He hugged her.

Too tight.

She made a "ghhhfff" sound but didn't complain.

Footsteps again.

And then Neha.

Wearing one of his old hoodies, sleeves rolled to the elbow, coffee in hand.

Hair tied up in a lazy bun. No makeup. No sketchpad.

Still the most astonishing thing he'd ever seen.

"You okay?" she asked, sipping.

He nodded.

"Just... slow morning."

She squinted at him.

"Is that a dream hangover?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"You looked weirdly peaceful last night. Like one of those monks who cracked the Wi-Fi password to heaven."

He laughed.

“Did I snore?”

“Like a backup generator.”

“Excellent.”

She smiled. Turned to the little girl. “Come brush. You’re late.”

The child slid off his lap.

Paused.

“Appa?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you coming for the drop-off?”

He smiled.

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

She ran off.

Neha followed.

But before she disappeared around the corner, she paused and looked back.

Her eyes lingered on him a little longer than usual.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Yeah?”

“You feel a bit... far away this morning.”

Samar looked at her.

Smiled faintly.

Then, as gently as he could say it:

"I'm just remembering the version of me that never made it here."

Neha blinked.

Didn't fully understand.

But nodded.

Then walked away.

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Chapter 20 - Versions of Us

The kitchen buzzed faintly under the fluorescent light. Warm idli batter fermented in a steel bowl. The rice cooker ticked like a dozing robot.

And on the counter... it sat.

The blood pressure monitor.

That same white plastic beast with the digital screen and smug beeping.

It hadn't changed much since 2006.

But Samar had.

He stared at it now, cross-legged on a stool, laughing softly to himself.

Not bitterly.

Not mockingly.

Just... amazed.

"I let you ruin two decades?" he muttered. "You look like a toaster had a panic attack."

"Talking to your past again?" came Neha's voice behind him.

He turned.

She leaned against the fridge, arms crossed, smiling.

"Caught me," he said.

She stepped forward, hip bumping him gently.

"Your past's cute."

"So is my present."

"Smooth."

He looked at her, then back at the BP monitor.

“You know,” she said, “you were terrified of that thing when we first got married. Wouldn’t even look at it.”

“I remember.”

“You said it beeped in a ‘judgy tone.’”

“It did beep judgily. That’s canon.”

She laughed. Then, after a pause:

“Can I tell you something weird?”

He looked up. “Of course.”

Neha ran a finger along the counter.

“That day. In college. When we met.”

“Mm-hmm?”

“I was sketching the chaiwala. Everyone else ignored me. I thought I’d finally have some peace. Then this awkward guy walked up and said, ‘You spiral really well.’”

Samar choked on his tea.

“Oh my God.”

“I remember thinking, he’s either completely hopeless or accidentally poetic.”

He grinned.

“And which was it?”

“Well,” she said, stepping closer, “you turned out to be both.”

Samar stared at her.

Eyes wide.

“That actually happened? You remember that line?”

“Of course I do. Why?”

He shook his head slowly, wonder breaking across his face like light.

“I just... I wasn’t sure.”

“Sure of what?”

“That the kid... that I... did it. That he really said the thing. That he didn’t choke.”

Neha raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve always choked. That’s what made it cute.”

They both laughed.

And then — silence.

Comfortable. Weightless.

She leaned in, hands on his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her waist.

They stood like that for a moment.

Just existing.

Just touching.

Their daughter called from the hallway. Sleepy. Needing to pee. Then immediately forgetting and asking about dinosaurs.

They guided her back to her little bed, tucked her in, kissed her forehead.

The moment lingered.

Then Neha took Samar’s hand.

No words.

They walked to their room.

Closed the door softly.

And under the gentle buzz of rain and memory and breath, they kissed.

Not like a beginning.

Not like an ending.

But like everything in between.

The time machine box was still on the coffee table.

Dark now. Silent. Ordinary.

Just a matte black appliance that looked like it should be holding bagels.

Samar stood alone in the living room at 2:11 a.m., barefoot, holding a glass of water he had already forgotten to drink.

He hadn't touched the box since coming back.

He didn't need to.

It had done its job.

He stared at it.

Then whispered, "Okay. We're even now."

The lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

The air near the window warped slightly — like heat over asphalt.

Samar's stomach dropped.

"No," he breathed. "No no no. You don't get to do this again. I already paid. I already—"

The space beside the couch folded inward.

And someone stepped out of it.

Not in a robot suit.

Not glowing.

Not dramatic.

Just... a man.

Late forties. Early fifties. Greying beard. Hollowed cheeks. Wrinkled hoodie. Hands scarred with old burns and trembling like they had lived too long around soldering irons and grief.

He looked human.

Which somehow made it worse.

They stared at each other.

The man swallowed.

“...You’re him,” he said hoarsely.

Samar didn’t answer.

He didn’t need to.

The man’s eyes filled instantly.

“Oh my God,” he whispered. “You’re really him. You’re the one who used it.”

Samar’s mouth went dry.

“You built it,” he said.

The man nodded.

A broken nod.

“Yes.”

Silence.

The kind that presses on the lungs.

“I’m sorry,” Samar said immediately. “I didn’t know. I swear. I found it near a dumpster. It was humming. I thought it was some idiot startup product or—”

“I know,” the man said gently.

That softness hurt more than rage.

"I left it there," he continued. "I panicked."

"...Why?" Samar asked.

The man walked slowly toward the coffee table.

Knelt in front of the box.

Touched it like it was a gravestone.

"Because I come from 2049," he said.

"The machine wasn't supposed to bring me here," Aaron said.

Samar frowned. "Then how did you—"

"Residual recoil," Aaron interrupted quietly.

He tapped the side of the box.

"It stores just enough energy to snap the builder to the last activation point. A kind of temporal return address. I built it that way so I wouldn't get stranded in the past if the jump went wrong."

Samar's stomach turned.

"So when I used it..."

"You burned the only real jump," Aaron said. "And triggered the recoil."

His jaw tightened.

"I was standing in my lab in 2049 watching the core go critical. Next thing I knew, I was on your street in 2026, vomiting into a hedge."

Samar whispered, "So it dragged you here."

Aaron nodded.

"And now it's dead forever."

Samar stiffened.

"That's... not very far," he whispered.

The man laughed once.

A dry, dead sound.

“It’s far enough to ruin everything.”

He exhaled.

“My name is Aaron Weiss.”

Samar nodded numbly.

“I built this machine for one jump,” Aaron said. “One correction. One last chance.”

He pressed his palm flat against the box.

“I waited thirty-seven years to finish it. Thirty-seven years of simulations. Power failures. Burned circuits. Grants rejected. People calling me insane. My wife begging me to stop. My son learning to knock quietly on my lab door so he wouldn’t interrupt my breakdowns.”

Samar’s chest tightened.

“My wife, Miriam, died in 2016,” Aaron said. “Drunk driver. Head-on collision. Instant.”

His jaw clenched.

“We had a fight that morning. A stupid one. About groceries. She wanted oat milk. I bought regular. She said it wasn’t about the milk. I said she was being dramatic.”

His voice cracked.

“She left angry. I let her.”

Silence.

“I built the machine to go back to that morning,” he said. “Just to say one sentence differently. Just one.”

Samar’s throat burned.

“Then why didn’t you use it?” he whispered.

Aaron looked toward the hallway.

Where a small night-light glowed.

Where a child slept.

"Because I ran the projections," he said. "Every version where I saved her... my son didn't exist."

Samar's breath hitched.

"I realized the machine doesn't give you your old life back," Aaron continued. "It gives you a different one. And it always takes something you love in exchange."

He laughed weakly.

"So I chickened out. I left the box there like a cursed microwave. And told myself I'd decide tomorrow."

He looked at Samar again.

"You decided for me."

Samar stepped back like he'd been punched.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I didn't know. I didn't know it was yours. I didn't know it was one-use. I didn't know I was stealing someone else's life."

Aaron shook his head.

"You didn't steal it."

He stood.

"You did what I couldn't."

Samar's voice shook.

"What happens to you now?"

Aaron hesitated.

Then said quietly:

"I don't go back," Aaron said quietly.

Samar frowned. "Then where do you go?"

Aaron looked around the room.

“At first? Probably a motel. Then a storage unit. Then a job I’m wildly overqualified for.”

He exhaled.

“Then I live forward. In a decade I already survived once.”

Samar’s throat tightened.

“You’ll never see them again.”

Aaron nodded.

“No.”

Then, softer:

“But at least my wife got to live a real life,” Aaron said.

“And at least my son got to be born.”

He swallowed.

“That’s two human lives.”

“I’m not allowed to erase either of them.”

Samar swallowed.

“You’re just... stuck with the grief?”

Aaron nodded.

“So are you,” he said gently.

“Just on the lucky side of it.”

They stood there.

Two men wrecked by time in opposite directions.

Then Aaron reached into his pocket.

Pulled out a folded photograph.

Set it on the table.

It was of a woman.

Smiling.

Dark hair.

Kind eyes.

Holding a toddler.

"This is Miriam," he said. "And this is Daniel. The boy I almost erased."

Samar stared at it.

Then whispered, "She's beautiful."

Aaron nodded.

"She was furious with me the day she died," he said softly.

"She still told me she loved me before she slammed the door."

Samar closed his eyes.

Aaron turned toward the window.

Paused.

Then said without looking back:

"You didn't steal my second chance."

"You reminded me why I didn't take it."

He stepped forward.

The air folded.

The room went still.

The box stayed dark.

Samar sank onto the couch.

Hands shaking.

Chest caving inward.

He didn't cry.

He couldn't.

He just sat there, staring at the photograph.

At the cost of his happiness.

From the hallway:

Soft footsteps.

Neha appeared.

Hair messy. Eyes half-asleep.

"Hey," she whispered. "You okay?"

Samar looked at her.

Then toward the hallway.

Where his daughter slept.

Then at the photograph.

"No," he said honestly.

"But I will be."

He stood.

Picked up the photo.

Set it gently inside the time machine box.

Closed the lid.

Forever.

Then he went back to bed.

And held his life like it could still disappear.

THE END

Charlotte , 2026.

Samar Arockiaraj is a 37-year-old software engineer who still flinches at the sight of a blood pressure cuff. Ever since a traumatic medical visit at sixteen, he's lived with crippling "white coat hypertension"—and even more tragically, the regret of never confessing his love to Nikita Deshmukh, the sharp, sketchbook-carrying girl who once spiraled her way into his heart in a Mumbai classroom.

One cardiologist visit, one sarcastic diagnosis, and one mysterious glowing package later... Samar wakes up in 2006, armed with a second chance to rewrite the past. But first, he has to convince his teenage self to take life—and love—seriously.

What follows is a riot of awkward mentorship, spilled ink, school peon disguises, emotional CPR, and a painfully slow-burn teenage romance that might just fix everything... if time doesn't pull him back first.

But when Samar returns to the present, he finds a life he doesn't recognize — or deserve. Married. A daughter. A sketchbook on the nightstand. And a shadow watching him from across the street.

***Because the time machine only works once.
And someone else wants it back.***

