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The Quiet Start

"Good evening, this is Arjun from NuvexaTech Support. You're speaking with a human and not a chatbot—so we'll try to keep things interesting," he said with his usual half-grin, his tone practiced but warm.

On the other end, chaos.

A man's voice, sharp and exhausted, burst through. "Your software just crashed in the middle of our inventory sync! I've got three trucks on standby and no access to dispatch. What the hell is going on over there?"

Arjun didn't flinch. He let the man speak. Let the static of his frustration crackle and burn. He didn't interrupt, didn't rush in with empty apologies. He just... listened.

When the shouting began to taper, Arjun asked gently, "Mr. Pillai, can I check—when did the sync freeze? Did it show any error before crashing, or just shut down?"

There was a pause, then a grunt.   "Red bar.   Said 'Memory overflow', or something. I swear, it's like the software knows my trucks are ready to roll and crashes on purpose."

Arjun smiled faintly,   already scrolling through logs.   "No conspiracy here, sir. Just a cranky system in need of a refresh. Let's clear the cache—I'll guide you through the override."

Less than ten minutes later, the trucks were rolling. Mr. Pillai's voice had dropped two octaves, and the call ended with a tired laugh.

"Appreciate it, man. Was ready to throw the whole thing out."

"I can relate," Arjun said. "My computer pulls the same stunt— it waits until I'm confident, then gives up."

* * *

The support floor began to quiet down as evening crept in. Most of the team had packed up.

Arjun stayed back, staring at an old photo—himself at ten, in a scout uniform, riverbank in the background. He remembered that trip: the fire, the trees, the talk about what he'd be when he grew up.

It was one of the few trips he ever went on. He had ideas back then. Big ones. But...

A soft knock on his desk partition snapped him back.

It was Riya—one of the QA leads, with anxious eyes and a slouch she didn't usually wear.

"Got a minute?" she asked, already pulling up the extra chair.

He gestured for her to sit.

"They had a product review today," she began. "I brought up an old issue we've been ignoring. It's still there—and if they release this version, it's going to cause problems for customers."

Arjun nodded, letting her speak.

"I said it straight—no sugar-coating. Just told them we haven't properly tested the older parts of the system."

"And?"

"And the whole room went quiet. Then my manager says— 'we'll talk about your tone later.' Like that was the problem. Not the bug. Not the risk. Just the way I said it."

She gave a small laugh—dry and tired.

Arjun smiled gently. "Why do you think he reacted like that?"

She paused. "Honestly? I don't know. Maybe I embarrassed him. Or maybe—" she frowned "—maybe I just didn't play the politics right."

Arjun didn't offer advice. Just nodded, like her thoughts were safe where they landed.

The weight in her shoulders seemed to ease, just a little.

She stood up and glanced at the time. "Crap. Didn't realize it had gotten this late."

Arjun checked the clock and leaned back in his chair. "I think I just missed my bus."

"When's the next one?"

"Not for another hour."

She slung her bag over her shoulder. "Come on. I'll drop you. I'm heading that way anyway."

"You sure?"

"Arjun, I just trauma-dumped for twenty minutes. It's the least I can do."

He smiled, stood up, and grabbed his bag.

* * *

That night, the traffic on Outer Ring Road was its usual, tangled mess of horns and impatience. Riya's little hatchback inched forward in the middle lane, caught in the same restless crawl as everything else.

"Every time I take this route, I hope it'll be better," she said.

"Still   better than standing around at the bus stop," Arjun replied.

After a few minutes of crackly radio and a loud ad for discount mattresses, Riya reached for her phone.

"Mind if I put on something less... painful?"

"Please," Arjun muttered.

She tapped a few buttons and a voice filled the car—not a celebrity's, not a newsreader's.   Just someone real—warm. Asking a woman named Anita about her childhood piano lessons and how that somehow led to her starting a soup kitchen.
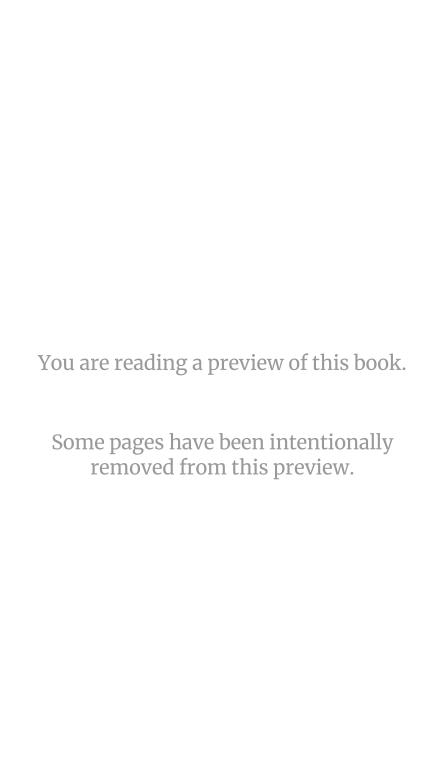
"Who is this?" Arjun asked.

"Some podcast.   Don't remember the name.   But the host... reminds me of you."

He glanced at her. "How so?"

"I don't know. Just... the way he communicates. Makes people open up."

Arjun didn't respond. But he listened.

* * *

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3

Roots and Reasons

It was a warm Sunday afternoon, the kind where the air shimmered with heat and everything moved a little slower.   Arjun waited at the metro exit, hands in pockets, eyes scanning the quiet road.

Riya waved at him from across the street.

"Ready to meet the podcast professor?" she teased.

Arjun chuckled as he fastened his seatbelt.   "Should I have brought a notepad?"

They drove toward the residential colony where her college senior, Dr.   Ved Bhatt, lived.   On the way, Arjun finally asked what he'd been wondering all morning.

"So, who exactly is this guy? I mean, apart from… you know, a podcast host."

Riya smiled. "Ved was my senior in college. Genius-level brain, but super grounded. He teaches horticulture at a government college. Always loved two things: nature and teaching. Podcasts were just a natural extension."

"Horticulture?" Arjun raised a brow.   "That's... not what I expected."

"Exactly. That's the point. His show isn't big or flashy. But it has loyal listeners—students, home gardeners, eco-nerds. And he never tried to go viral. He just... teaches. In the most calming way."

Arjun nodded, intrigued. A niche podcast. A teacher by nature. Something about that felt real—doable.

They arrived at a small independent house, painted pale yellow, with an open gate leading into a lush courtyard.   Inside, they found Ved sitting cross-legged on a stone bench, surrounded by potted herbs, pruning what looked like bonsai.

"Don't let the plants fool you," Riya whispered. "He's actually quite intense."

Ved looked up and smiled. Not warm exactly, but curious—like someone who reads people the way others read books.   "You must be Arjun," he said, standing to shake hands. "Any friend of Riya's is... subject to interrogation."

Arjun laughed, easing up. They sat down in the shade of a guava tree. The air smelled of damp soil and basil.

After a little polite chat, Riya nudged him gently.   "So... Arjun has a confession to make."

Ved turned to him, eyebrows raised. "Let me guess. You want to start a podcast?"

Arjun hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. Or... I think I do. I've been circling the idea for weeks. But I can't seem to—start."

Ved nodded, then asked without ceremony, "Why?"

Arjun blinked. "I—well, I like listening to people. I think good conversations matter. And I feel like I've had so many that just vanish into thin air."

Ved leaned back, eyes narrowing—not in judgment, but consideration.

"Do you know how many podcasts exist in the world right now?"

"Um, no idea."

"Over four million," Ved said. "And guess how many stop before hitting ten episodes?"

Arjun hesitated. "I don't know... twenty-five percent?"

"Try eighty."

Arjun blinked, eyebrows rising. "Seriously?"

Ved nodded. "The graveyard of podcasts is full of people who didn't know why they started. They liked the idea. The sound. The vibe. But when the numbers didn't come, or life got busy, or the episodes got hard—they stopped."

The garden went quiet for a moment. Birds chirped somewhere overhead.

Ved leaned forward slightly. "So I'll ask again. Why do you want to start a podcast? Not for the world. For you."

Arjun looked down, his thumb brushing the edge of the stone bench. "I've always been the listener.   People open up to me without even realizing it.   And when they do... I don't know, something in me feels lighter—like I can breathe a little easier. These stories—beautiful, strange, funny, raw... if I don't share them, they just disappear. And with them, maybe that feeling too."

Ved nodded slowly. "Better."

* * *

Ved drew a circle in the middle of his notepad.   "Next step— define your listener. Not your audience. Just one person. The one you're really speaking to."

Arjun leaned in but hesitated. "Wait—shouldn't I be figuring out mics or editing apps first? That stuff feels more urgent."

Ved waved a hand, dismissing it with a small smile.   "All of

that you can buy, borrow, or Google. But this—this part—you can't download. You need to know who you're making this for. Because that shapes everything else."

Arjun sat back, quieter now.

Ved pointed to the circle again. "Give them a name. Where they are in life. What keeps them up at night?"

Arjun tilted his head. "I get the exercise. But isn't this kind of... narrow? I mean, what if multiple types of people listen? Why not just talk to whoever connects?"

Ved looked amused. "You can. And they will. But if you don't know exactly who you're holding the mic for, your voice will drift. You'll speak in generalities."

Arjun crossed his arms. "But shouldn't I keep it open? Let the story speak for itself?"

"Sure," Ved said, nodding. "But let me ask—have you ever told a story to a crowd versus telling it to one close friend?"

Arjun hesitated. "Yeah. It's... different. You cut things out. Or say too much. Or start second-guessing."

"Exactly," Ved said, tapping his pen on the page. "When you picture a crowd, you try to sound right. When you picture one person, you try to be real."

Arjun looked down at the table, thoughtful.

"And it's not just about the tone," Ved continued. "It helps with the flow. The kinds of stories you choose.   The questions you ask. Even the sponsor you say yes to."

Arjun looked up. "Sponsor?"

Ved smiled.   "You'll get there.   But imagine recommending time-management tools to someone already stretched thin. Or shouting over music to someone looking for quiet. Your listener keeps you honest."

Arjun sighed. "Okay... fair. I still feel weird giving them a name."

"Then don't name them. But know them. If you're speaking to everyone, you're speaking to no one."

A beat passed.

Arjun closed his eyes for a moment. Then opened them. "She's... Meera."

Ved stopped tapping his pen.

"She holds it together—for everyone. At work, at home. She's kind, quiet. Listens more than she talks. People lean on her, but no one really checks in."

Ved leaned forward slightly. "Go on."

"She's not falling apart. She just... doesn't have a place to exhale. She doesn't want advice. She wants to hear that someone else

gets it. Even if it's through someone else's life."

Ved nodded slowly, his voice softer now. "Good. Keep her in the room when you speak. Not the algorithm. Not a trend. Just her. That's how you stay human."

* * *

He let that sink in, then moved to the last layer.

"Your value proposition," Ved said, "is your show's promise. You've got ten words to tell someone why your podcast is worth their time."

Arjun frowned. "That's hard."

"It should be," Ved said. "But here's the trick—use this sentence:

'My podcast helps [X] with [Y] by [Z].'"

Arjun thought aloud. "My podcast helps thoughtful listeners feel seen by sharing raw, real-life conversations."

Ved nodded, satisfied. "Now we're not just recording for fun. We're building purpose. Every episode has to deliver on that promise."

He slid the paper toward Arjun and added one final line: "If your next episode doesn't align with this—toss it."

* * *

They didn't talk much after that.   Ved turned his focus to trimming a rosemary pot. Arjun sat still, rereading the sentence. He folded the paper carefully and tucked it into his pocket.
As Arjun stood, he looked at Riya beside him.   She didn't say anything right away. Just bumped her shoulder lightly against his.
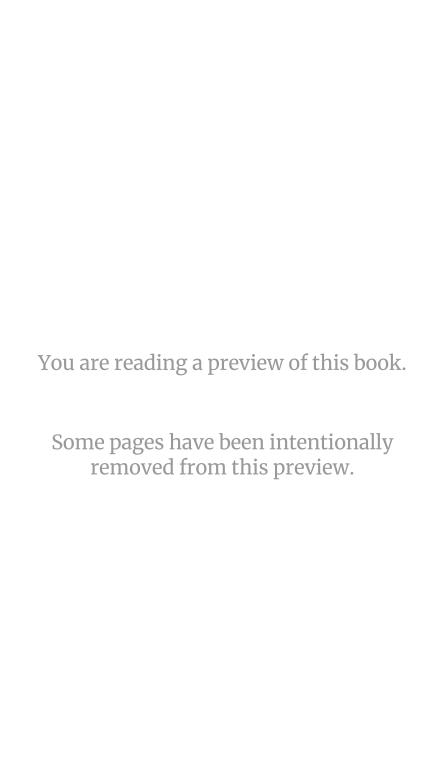He looked at her, and she grinned. "Your brain looks full."

Arjun laughed softly. "Yeah. But... in a good way."

They started walking toward the gate. The sun had dipped lower, shadows stretching.
Riya tugged at his sleeve, mock-serious. "I need ice cream after that kind of intense session."

He smiled again—this time, wider. "Let's go."

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5

What You Actually Need

Arjun's browser had 27 tabs open—and they all disagreed with each other.

"USB is fine."
"USB is the worst."
"XLR only."
"Buy this $800 mic."
"Your phone is all you need."

He leaned back in his chair and groaned.	What started as excitement about recording his first episode had spiraled into a wormhole of boom arms, phantom power, and strange opinions from faceless reviewers on YouTube.

"I just want to record someone talking," he muttered.	"Why does it feel like I need an engineering degree?"

He opened an AI chatbot, typed, "What mic should I use for my podcast?"

It answered confidently—too confidently—with more specs and terms. After ten minutes, Arjun closed the tab and reached for his phone.

"Ved," he texted. "Need a real human. SOS."

* * *

The studio didn't look like much from the outside. Just a metal door beside a staircase smelling faintly of solder and rain.

But inside, it felt like another world: quiet, warm, wrapped in textured foam and soft corners.

Kabir sat cross-legged on a low stool, surrounded by microphones like a monk among relics.

"You're Arjun, the podcast guy," Kabir said, smiling.

"I'm Arjun, the confused guy," he replied. "I thought starting a podcast meant recording a conversation. Not learning a second language."

Kabir chuckled and slid over a cold coffee. "Let's untangle that language. Start with the obvious—why not use your phone?"

"That's what I've been asking everyone! Phones have decent mics now, right?"

"Sure," Kabir said. "They'll capture your voice. And your neighbor's dog. And the fan. And the traffic outside."

Arjun sighed.

"Phone mics hear everything. Good gear doesn't just record—it focuses. It's like the difference between sitting across from someone and shouting across a parking lot."

"So that's why people use dedicated mics?"

"Right. A good mic doesn't just hear you—it ignores everything else. But even great mics can fail in the wrong setup."

Kabir picked up two microphones from the table and held them side by side.

"There are two main kinds: condenser and dynamic.

Condensers are super sensitive—great detail, beautiful sound... if you're in a quiet, treated room. But if there's even a ceiling fan humming or a scooter outside, it hears it like it's sitting in your lap."

Arjun nodded. "That's my place. I have a neighbor who thinks phone calls need to be shouted."

Kabir grinned. "Then you need a dynamic mic. Less sensitive, more focused. It captures you, not the room."

"That clears up a lot," Arjun admitted. "But I'm guessing the mic's just one piece of the puzzle?"

Kabir pointed to the desk. "Now, let's say you're recording. You

lean forward. Or you move your chair. Or tap your hand. The mic picks up every single bump.   That becomes a thud in the audio."

"I've heard that!" Arjun said. "Like tiny earthquakes every time someone moves."

"Exactly. That's why we don't place mics directly on the table. We suspend them—either from a boom arm or a mic stand. That way, your movements don't shake the audio."

"Alright. So no thuds, no barking dogs. What else?"

Kabir smiled. "Have you ever said a word starting with 'P' into a mic?"

Arjun thought. "Probably?"

"Try this: 'Podcast people pick peppered peanuts.'"

Arjun said it.

Kabir winced, pulling off his headphones. "There. That blast of air? That's a plosive. A tiny wind-punch your mic can't handle."

"Sounds awful."

"It is. That's why we use pop filters—little mesh screens that break the air before it hits the mic. Keeps the puh from punching holes in your audio."

"So it's not about sounding fancy. It's about making it comfortable to listen to."

Kabir nodded. "Exactly. You want your listener to forget there's a mic at all. Just them, you, and a voice in their ear."

Arjun was scribbling furiously now.

"And what about headphones?"

Kabir pointed at his. "Non-negotiable. Think of them as a mirror. If something's wrong—background noise, a buzz, a guest drifting too far from the mic—you hear it instantly. Without headphones, you'll spend hours editing something you could've fixed in ten seconds."

"Ah," Arjun said. "So it's not just to look cool."

"Exactly. It's so you don't find out after the recording that your guest sounded like they were underwater."

Arjun laughed.

"Okay, last one. Everyone keeps shouting USB! XLR! Audio interface! What's that all about?"

Kabir picked up two cables—one slim, one thick.

"USB mics are plug-and-play. Super convenient for solo recording. But they usually lock you into a single audio track—yours and your guest's voices get merged if you're using two USB mics

on the same computer."

"Why's that a problem?"

"Because in editing, you want control. Maybe your guest is too quiet, or your voice has a weird echo. With one combined track, you can't fix one without affecting the other."

Arjun nodded. "So what's the alternative?"

"XLR mics. They connect through an audio interface—that's a little box that plugs into your computer.   It lets you use multiple mics and keeps each one on its own track.   Perfect for interviews."

"So the interface splits the voices?"

"Exactly. And that gives you way more flexibility later, when you're editing in a DAW—that's your audio editing software. Think of it like Photoshop for sound. More tracks, more control, better results."

"Okay," Arjun said. "That actually makes a lot of sense."

"And if you ever want to do in-person interviews—which you said you would—you'll need two mics.   So you'll want a two-input interface. One mic for you. One for the guest."

"Which also means two boom arms.   Two pop filters.   Two headphones."

"Yep," Kabir said. "Double everything, except the nerves."

They both laughed.
They moved into the booth.
Kabir adjusted two mics on boom arms, handed Arjun a pair of headphones, and nodded toward the seat.

"Talk."

Arjun cleared his throat. "Uh... this is Arjun, testing my very adult voice."

He heard himself in the headphones—rich, clear, shockingly close. "Oh. That's... me?"

Kabir grinned. "It's weird at first. You'll get used to it."

"Do I need acoustic panels and all that?"

"Not unless you have money and no curtains.   Just use what softens the sound—rugs, cushions, blankets.   Think of your room as a giant pillow fort for sound."

Kabir rolled up the XLR cable and carefully placed the mic back into its pouch.

Arjun sat back in the chair, quiet for a moment. His notebook was half-full—gear names, audio tips, good advice. But doubt was starting to scribble between the lines.

Then, almost reluctantly, he said it.

"This might sound stupid," he said finally, "but... I don't think I can afford all this. Not right now."

Kabir didn't flinch. He nodded, like he'd heard it before. Maybe said it himself once. "It's not silly," he said. "It's honest."

Arjun shrugged. "I mean, I'm not even sure if this podcast thing will work. What if I spend all this money and quit after four episodes?"

Kabir smiled. "Then you'll join the sacred graveyard of abandoned podcasts. Right next to mine."

That got a laugh out of Arjun. "Wait, you had a podcast?"

"Two. One about weird Indian instruments, and one where I just ranted about studio myths. Both gone. Both worth it."

"So what do I do?" Arjun asked. "I want it to sound good. But I can't drop a huge sum on setup before I've even recorded one proper episode."

Kabir leaned forward. "Then don't."

Arjun blinked. "What?"

"Don't buy anything right now. You already have a mic."

Arjun blinked. "I do?"

Kabir tapped Arjun's phone. "That's your starter kit."

"But didn't we just say phone mics are…"

"They're limited, yeah. But they're better than not starting at all. And with a few tweaks, you can make them surprisingly listenable."

He stood up, walked to the corner, and pulled out a small clip-on lavalier mic.

"Here," he said, handing it over. "Plugs into your phone. Not studio-grade, but focused, clean—and cheaper than a pair of jeans. I'll lend you this one."

Arjun held it like it was fragile.

Kabir paused. "You'll need to buy a second one—same kind. Clip one to yourself, one to your guest. Record on two phones, then sync the files later when editing."

Arjun raised an eyebrow. "Two phones?"

Kabir nodded. "One per person.   That way, you get separate audio tracks.   Cleaner.   Easier to fix.   Bonus—you can sit wherever you want without crowding around a single mic."

"How do I sync two different recordings?"

Kabir grinned. "Ah—the old clap trick. You hit record on both phones, then clap—once, loud and clear. That spike shows up on both audio tracks. Line them up in your editor, and boom—synced."

Arjun looked impressed. "That's… actually clever."

He turned the lav mic over in his hand like it might reveal a secret.

"Record in your softest corner," Kabir added. "Mattress behind you, blanket over the desk. Phone on airplane mode."

"And what if I mess it up?"

Kabir smiled. "Then you mess it up. Fix what you can. Laugh about the rest. You're not broadcasting from NASA. You're just learning."

Arjun exhaled, slower this time. "So I don't need to wait until everything's perfect."

"Nope," Kabir said. "You need to start. Then build."

He gestured around his studio. "This? Took me six years. I started with a sock over a cheap mic and a quilt nailed to a wall."

Arjun stood up, mic in one hand, notebook in the other. "I think I can work with a sock and a quilt."

Kabir grinned. "Now you sound like a podcaster."

Arjun smiled. Not because he had it all figured out—but because he finally felt like he could begin.

6

Before the First Word

The table was set. Two chairs, angled just right. A folded blanket hung behind them like a soft, homemade sound panel. Pillows stacked against the wall.

Arjun stood back, took it all in, then crouched to plug in the tiny lavalier mics. One for him, one for Nisha—each ready to be clipped discreetly to a collar.

He opened the recording app on both phones. Hit record. "Test. Arjun speaking," he said into one mic.

Then leaned toward the second. "Test. Nisha's mic."

He paused, listened back.

Clean, close sound—like he was speaking to himself across the table. He smiled, this time for real. This could work.

* * *

Then came the sound of footsteps. Slippers on tile.

"Arjun?"   his mother called out from the hallway.   "What happened to the blanket from the guest bed?"

She stopped at the door. "What is this?"

Arjun turned slowly.

She looked around. "What is all this? Why is the blanket on the wall?"

Arjun looked up from untangling the mic wire. "It's for record-ing."

"Recording what?" Now she stepped inside.

"A podcast."

"A what?"

"A... podcast." He stood, brushing off his hands. "It's like... Two people sit and talk."

She squinted. "About what?"

"About life. Stories. Small things. Big things. Just... whatever comes up."

A beat.

"And this is for your office?"

"No, Ma. It's… not for office. It's just… something I'm trying."

She looked at the pillows stacked on her knitting stool. "You're trying to talk to people… sitting under blankets?"

Arjun sighed. "To stop ech— I mean… it just makes the voice clearer, that's all."

She walked around the setup like it might topple at any second, then turned back to him.

"Are you feeling lonely?"

"What? No! Ma—please, it's nothing like that."

She nodded, slowly. "I'm not going anywhere. I want to see what this is."

"Ma—"

"I won't say anything," she said, already inching toward the corner like she was settling in for a drama.

Arjun shifted awkwardly. "It's just… Ma, she might not feel comfortable if you're here."

His mother paused mid-step, narrowed her eyes. "*She?*"

Arjun instantly regretted speaking. "Nisha. The guest."

"Ah." A long pause. "So now girls are coming home to 'talk' in your soundproofed room with pillows on the wall?"

"Ma, it's not like that."

She crossed her arms. "And she won't be 'comfortable' if I'm sitting quietly in my own house?"

"It's not—look, it's just that people open up more when they feel... private."

"So I am privacy now?" Her voice rose half a note.

"It's not the living room, it's my room—"

"Which is in my house."

Arjun ran a hand through his hair, trying not to laugh or cry. "Ma. Please. This is not what you think."

"I'm just sitting.   I won't breathe loud.   I won't cough.   I'll become a flowerpot."

"A what?"

Before Arjun could respond, the doorbell rang.

He leapt up, mumbling, "That's her." The blanket flapped as he jogged past it toward the door.

His mother stayed in the room, arms folded, surveying the

space.

At the door, Nisha stood with a slightly sheepish smile and a paper box of cookies in her hands.

Arjun smiled. "Perfect timing. Come in."

Arjun's mother turned as Nisha stepped in. Their eyes met—a flicker of polite smiles, but also something quieter beneath.

"Would you like some tea?" Arjun asked.

She nodded. "Sure."

He disappeared into the kitchen.

"Come," his mother said, gesturing. "Have a seat."

Nisha stepped further in, glancing around the room—blanket on the wall, cushions in clusters, two phones neatly angled like props in a makeshift studio.

"It's impressive," she said, easing onto the chair. "A little intimidating. But impressive."

"So," his mother asked, "are you working with him?"

"I used to," Nisha said. "I left last year to take care of my father—he had some health issues."

His mother's expression shifted—an inward flicker. "And your

mother?"

"She passed away when I was in school."

A beat.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

Nisha offered a small smile. "It's okay. I do part-time tutoring now. Language classes, mostly."

That seemed to light something in her. "I used to teach too. After Arjun's father... well, I needed something I could do from home. I taught neighborhood kids for years."

"Oh?" Nisha smiled. "Looks like we've walked some of the same roads."

His mother chuckled. "Funny, isn't it? How a kitchen table and a child's question can feel like the whole world"

"I once got paid with a thank-you note scribbled on a candy wrapper," Nisha said.

"Luxury. I got mine on a dried leaf. Still crinkled like it just fell off a tree."

They both laughed—a real, easy laugh that softened the room.

Then Nisha glanced at her. "Sometimes I wonder... what's harder—growing up with one parent or being one."

His mother gave a quiet exhale. "Neither. Or both. I don't know. You just... do what needs doing."

A pause followed—shared but unspoken.

* * *

Arjun returned, balancing three cups of tea, steam was curling up like question marks.   He set down the tea and placed the opened box of cookies between them.

There was a quiet clink of cups.   A few sips.   Then, without looking directly at Nisha, Arjun asked, almost under his breath, "Hey, um... is it okay if Ma stays in the room while we record?"

She looked up.

"I mean," he added quickly, "only if you're comfortable. I totally get it if it feels weird."

Nisha smirked. "After the café incident?" She popped a cookie in her mouth.   "You already lost the right to worry about my comfort."

Arjun groaned. "Can we please not bring that up?"

"Wait," his mother said, eyes narrowing. "What café?"

"Nothing," Arjun muttered, suddenly very interested in his tea.

"But honestly," Nisha said, softer now, "I think I'd actually feel

more at ease if she's here. Feels less… formal. Like we're just talking."

Arjun blinked. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "Absolutely."

So they adjusted the chairs, moved a cushion, shifted one of the phones slightly.   His mother settled in with her cup, as promised—quiet, but present.

Arjun took a breath, glanced at Nisha, then tapped the screen.

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