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Paths Converged

Sangita Ghodake
Pune, India

Meera sat on a serene beach in Bali, the gentle waves lapping at the shore. At 55, she had embraced her solitude, finding peace in her travels alone. Today, she sipped coconut water, watching the sunset paint the sky in hues of orange and pink. Living in a one-bedroom flat, she spent her income on travel, having explored more than thirty countries. Emotional upheavals were not for her; she preferred the calm of independence. Her parents, both over eighty, wished for her to be with them, but Meera remained resolute in her choice of lifestyle. To her, “one’s company is two’s crowd.”

Her perception began to change when she met Raj, a 50-year-old, jolly, and social man, during a chance encounter in Scandinavian Europe. In a quaint café overlooking the fjords, Meera admired the self-sufficiency of the locals. The atmosphere buzzed with laughter and warmth, a stark contrast to the cold climate.

“Beautiful view, isn’t it?” Raj said, a smile lighting up his face.

Meera glanced up. “Yes, it is. Just the way I like it - quiet.”

“I’m Raj,” he introduced himself. “You travel alone often?”

“Always,” she replied, her tone firm. “I believe we come alone and go alone. No need for company.”

Raj raised an eyebrow. “Really? But isn’t life about connection? We’re social animals, after all.”

Meera shrugged. “Perhaps. But I find solace in solitude - no expectations, no obligations.”

Raj chuckled, leaning back on his hands. “That sounds liberating, but what about shared moments? The laughter, the experiences?”

“They’re fleeting,” Meera said, her gaze fixed on the horizon. “I’d rather not rely on others for my happiness.”

“Think about it,” he pressed. “Every land has people; there’s hardly any ‘no man’s land.’ Isn’t it richer to engage with others?”

“I can appreciate the world just as deeply on my own,” she replied, her tone unwavering.

Raj leaned in, his expression earnest. “But what about emotional experiences? Those crises - aren’t they part of being alive?”

“They are,” Meera admitted, “but I don’t need someone by my side to navigate them. I can stand tall alone.”

Raj smirked. “Sometimes it takes a little push, a hand to hold, to realize your own strength.”

Meera crossed her arms, a hint of defiance in her voice. “I don’t want that. I value my independence.”

As their discussion turned to the lifestyle and attitude of Westerners, Raj explained, “Scandinavians have mastered the art of living well - strong communities, independence, and a focus on quality of life. After World War II, they really began exploring the world, embracing life in all its forms.”

Meera nodded, intrigued. “I admire their self-sufficiency. It’s inspiring.”

Raj smiled, sensing her appreciation. “But there’s more to it. Their wealth isn’t just in material goods; it’s in their commitment to charity and social work. They understand that true happiness comes from lifting others as well.”

“Really?” Meera’s interest piqued. “I hadn’t thought of that. We Indians also do a lot of charity. What’s your take on it?”

“Agreed. We often do charity in the name of God. But today, we have many social reformers doing great work for the sake of their country. Especially after the Holocaust, many Europeans embraced a new perspective on life. They volunteer in their communities, support global initiatives. It’s not just about enjoying life for themselves; it’s about making a difference.”

Meera pondered this. “Maybe there’s more to connection than I thought. We Indians often get entangled in relationships that end in disillusionment.”

Raj raised an eyebrow. “Oh! You think like that? On the other hand, the rest of the world craves relationships. Life without emotional ups and downs can feel empty. We learn through this give and take.”

Weeks later, while trekking through the vast Thar Desert in India, Meera found herself caught in a perilous situation. As she admired the golden dunes, a group of rough-looking men approached, their intentions clear. Panic surged through her as they encircled her.

“Stay calm, and no one gets hurt,” one of them sneered.

Just as fear gripped her, she remembered her resolve to stand tall alone. “You won’t get anything from me,” she shouted defiantly.

But the men laughed, advancing toward her. Just as despair began to creep in, a distant sound echoed across the desert. Raj and a group of fellow travelers, whom he had met during his adventures, appeared on the horizon, riding camels.

“Hey! Get away from her!” Raj shouted, his voice carrying authority.

The rogues hesitated, and in that moment of distraction, Raj and his companions charged in. With swift movements, they surrounded the men, who quickly realized they were outnumbered. A tense standoff ensued, but the rogues retreated, vanishing into the desert sands.

Meera stood there, breathless, as Raj approached her. “Are you okay?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

“I... I think so,” she replied, shaken but relieved. “Thank you.”

Raj smiled gently. “You were brave. But you don’t have to face everything alone.”

A year later, fate brought them together again in a café back in India. Meera looked different—radiant, almost glowing. Raj’s eyes widened as he recognized her.

“Meera! You look... different!” he exclaimed.

She smiled warmly. “I’ve changed a bit, I suppose. Life has a way of doing that.”

“What happened?” Raj asked, curiosity piquing.

“I realized that while I come alone, I leave behind memories and experiences. They matter,” Meera said, her tone reflective.

Raj nodded, a grin spreading across his face. “So, you’ve reconsidered the whole ‘lone traveler’ thing?”

“Not completely,” she replied, “but I understand now that those emotional crises—every heartbreak, every joy—are part of a greater connection.”

“Exactly!” Raj said, enthusiasm lighting up his eyes. “They shape us, bind us.”

“I’ve also learned it’s okay to let people in,” Meera added, her smile softening. “That experience in the desert taught me that strength can come from support.”

Raj’s expression turned serious. “So, we’re both travellers on this journey—just taking different paths.”

“Seems so,” Meera grinned. “And now we have stories to share.”

As the weeks passed, they continued to meet, their conversations deepening, their bond growing. One evening, while enjoying tea at their favourite café, Raj turned to Meera.

“You know, I admire your strength,” he said, sincerity in his voice.

“And I appreciate your insistence on connection,” Meera replied playfully. “You make me see life differently.”

“That’s the beauty of it, isn’t it? Learning from one another,” Raj said, a warm smile on his face.

“Yes,” Meera agreed, gazing out at the bustling street. “We come alone, but we don’t have to go alone.”

“And in the end,” Raj added, “we leave behind more than we take—memories, impact, our DNA in the world.”

With a newfound understanding, they raised their teacups in a toast.

“Here’s to our paths converging - forever friends in this journey of life,” Meera said, her eyes sparkling.

As laughter filled the air, they celebrated the richness of life’s connections, embracing the beauty of their shared journeys - together yet apart.