

THE JEHLUM BOYS

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Chapter – 11

Frustration and the Change

“Don’t tell this to Nishant,” Brijnath was telling Shyama.

“What happened?” Nishant asked, entering the tent unexpectedly. “What are you trying to hide from me?” he said, “And why this gloom on your faces?”

Caught-off guard Brijnath and Shyama looked at each other.

“How come you are back so early *Beta*? Is the school closed today?” They asked almost in unison trying to camouflage their surprise with faint smiles.

Nishant looked towards Seema who was crying while Shyama was sitting next to her, her comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry *Beta*, tomorrow onwards I will also come with you and we will go even earlier,” Shyama told Seema while rubbing her back tenderly. “Now stop crying, let us see what your *Bhaya* has come back for.”

“What happened *Mummy*, go earlier where? Will somebody tell me what is going on here?” His patience waning, he raised his voice.

Shyama’s answerless look further annoyed him.

She turned towards Brijnath who kept his hand on Nishant’s shoulder.

“Nothing *Beta*, she is scared to go out in the open in the mornings that is why her mother is saying she will also accompany her tomorrow onwards. You tell me, why did you come back?” he asked leading Nishant out of the tent.

Nishant did not move. Sensing a hush-up he understood there was more to what Brijnath had told him. He knew his parents well enough to know they were lying.

Turning towards Seema, he asked, "Seema you tell me, why you are crying?"

Seema rushed into his arms like a petrified baby, her cries becoming louder and unabashed, as if she was waiting to be in her brother's arms.

Trembling, she clung to him with all her might.

Nishant was shocked. His heart sank.

I have never seen her being so scared. Never ever. Not even on our worst night. What could be more frightening than that?

He wound his arms around her, holding her close to him, comforting her while looking towards his parents.

"What is it Seema? Tell me," he said, his tone still firm yet lowered this time.

Seema gasped. Gradually raising her head she looked into her brother's reassuring eyes while he dotingly wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Tell me," he said.

She took a deep breath. "*Bhaiya* when we go to ease ourselves at dawn a few local boys harass us daily." Her each word was cracking as she talked.

"They have been stalking us for more than a month now; harassing us like putting torch lights on our faces, throwing pebbles at us or hooting," she said. "We would ignore them, but today one of them, whose name is Pradeep Bhatial, came over and grabbed my hand. He even tried to pull me towards himself. Babli *Didi*, Kaki *Didi* and others managed to save me from his clutches. But he has threatened to come back *Bhaiya*." She again kept her head on his chest - still trembling, still gasping.

Though shocked at the revelations Nishant did not let it show on his face. Holding back his emotions he cuddled his frightened little sister in his arms.

"Tell me one thing Seema, how do you know his full name?" he asked a little while later once he felt the moment was opportune.

"*Bhaiya* he has talked to me during daytime also a few times. I would also talk to him. But when he started following me everywhere I began ignoring him." Sounding apologetic she acknowledged her knowing the boy.

"Is he of your age?" Nishant probed further underplaying her confession.

"No *Bhaiya* they are all big boys, must be in college."

"How many are there?"

Four to five boys," she replied. "I am scared *Bhaiya*. Can't I ease myself here in the tent only? I can keep a separate tub-sink for myself like others do for small children and old people."

The words hit Nishant like a cannon. His heart wrenched at the fright and desperation of his sister.

No longer able to conceal his emotions he held her close to him till the mist in his eyes settled. Brijnath and Shyama looked at each other, choking on the lump that had formed in their throats.

"Don't worry, I will do something," Nishant finally spoke. "And mummy is right. Tomorrow onwards you go with her for a few days. Tell your friends also to go with their mothers."

Kissing her on the forehead he sat her down before walking out of the tent.

He walked aimlessly till he reached the end of the camp. The last utterance of his sister *Can't I ease myself here in the tent* kept constantly haunting him as he sat on a pile of unbaked bricks. Tearing his hair in frustration, he began howling loudly and unabashedly.

For a few moments, he vented his innermost feelings before suddenly hopping on to the ground.

Looking around he began picking up pebbles and throwing them with all his might at the skies. "WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU? WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO US?"

His voice choking with his own tears. He was shouting at the top of his pitch as he flung each pebble with desperate frenzy, aiming deep in the clouds.

Meanwhile a few of his friends from the camp, who were playing cards nearby, saw him hurling stones at the sky. They rushed to the spot. One of them cautiously came forward placing his hand on his shoulder. Nishant turned around.

They were startled at seeing his state. His body was quivering uncontrollably and eyes were blood shot.

They all came closer to him. One of them offered him water in the plastic jug they were carrying.

"What is the matter *yaar*? Tell us," they asked in unison as Nishant emptied the jug in his mouth.

Heaving a deep sigh, he narrated the ordeal to them.

"We can't live like wimps. No one will come to help us. No one. We will have to take the matter in our own hands," said Nishant.

A brief uncomfortable silence ensued. The boys were looking at each other as if waiting for one of them to take the lead. Finally, one boy came forward.

“Yes I agree. This hell is becoming even worse for our mothers and sisters,” he said, extending his hand towards Nishant. Others too joined in. Nishant thought for a moment, looking at each one of them, before placing his hand on their joined hands.

Next day, at the crack of the dawn, Pradeep Bhatial along with his friends was keeping a track on the group of girls going towards the bushes outside the camp.

The bunch from the camp was moving steadily while Pradeep and his friends were tiptoeing at a distance, zeroing in on them, waiting for them to reach their end point.

His eyes scanning for Seema, he was constantly gesturing to his friends to remain quiet and camouflaged in the darkness.

The girls meanwhile halted at their chosen spot. Pradeep waved to his friends to spread out so as to surround the whole group. He did not want any slip outs.

Finally, he spotted Seema’s drape. Signaling to each other to get ready for the final sweep they closed in on the group.

Pradeep straightway headed for his kill. Coming within the striking distance, he pulled the drape away while trying to grab the arm with his other hand. Suddenly, he felt a grip on his stretched hand. Before he could realise what was happening a shattering metal knock to his head brought him to his knees.

Dizzied and dazed he tried getting up, but another blow to his face made him hit the ground moaning in pain. In a bid to save himself from further drubbing, he instantly rolled over giving himself a breather.

Still dizzy, he rubbed his eyes trying to figure out what had hit him. Gradually, he was able to place a faint figure of Nishant holding a small metallic vessel in his hand.

“Who are you?” he groaned, his voice cracking in pain.

His eyes began looking around for his friends whose painful moans were piercing the early morning calm.

Armed with lathis (sticks), Nishant's friends were hammering his gang.

Fathoming they had been tricked into a vicious assault he made one desperate attempt to lunge at Nishant trying to catch hold of his midriff.

Swerving backwards Nishant leapt to his right digging his left elbow into his spine. Pradeep crouched. Without letting him gather himself Nishant sharply brought his knee up banging his head against it.

Hobbling for a moment Pradeep hit the ground writhing in pain.

Still seething with rage, Nishant began kicking him mercilessly.

“YOU DARED TO TOUCH MY SISTER.YOU SWINE. YOU WILL PAY FOR HER TEARS.” His voice was quivering with rage as he pounded him with kicks, “AND YOU WILL PAY NOW.” Suddenly he paused and began searching his pockets.

One of his friends caught sight of him. His heart sank even as his *Lathi* slipped from his hands.

“NOOO. NISSSSHANTT STOPPP!” he shouted. Raising his hands he was making desperate gestures while running towards Nishant, pleading with him to stop.

His other friends also were alarmed. Without wasting any moment they made a dash towards him.

“STOP NISHANT, NOOO!” they were shouting while running towards him.

Nishant, holding a knife in his hand, was looming menacingly over Pradeep who was lying on the ground. Panicking on such extreme turn of events, Pradeep's friends turned tail and vanished.

In the next moment, Nishant in all his ferocity dived on Pradeep aiming to thrust the knife in his chest.

Pradeep froze.

All of a sudden, just in the nick of the moment, he was dragged out of harm's way by two of Nishant's friends, saving him from the stab. Nishant's other friends held him back while a startled Pradeep got up. He was trembling with fear.

Nishant's friends urged Pradeep to run away.

Wrestling with his friends Nishant managed to free his arm and make a gash on Pradeep's shoulder as he was fleeing. Pradeep shrieked and disappeared into the darkness of the bushes.

"DON'T LET THE BASTARD RUN AWAY. LET GO OF ME," Nishant growled. He was still panting, his rage refusing to die down. His friends were worried even as they held on to him.

"Nishant, it is okay, they have learnt their lesson. Cool yourself down," one of them said and the others echoed.

Eventually, Nishant calmed down. Heaving a sigh of relief, his friends also loosened their grips.

Late in the morning, Nishant was having his breakfast. He was quiet with the usual frown on his face. Brijnath and Shyama, unaware of the happenings at dawn, were looking at each other worried about his growing bitterness.

Hey Mahadev have mercy. My son is gradually losing it. He is becoming the antithesis of what he was in Srinagar. Shyama's heart ached on seeing her son in such a depressive state day in and day out.

"Beta, will you take some more tea?" She tried breaking the ice. Nishant shook his head.

As he was packing his school bag, two policemen entered the tent.

"Are you Nishant Raina?" One of them asked looking towards him.

"Yes sir," Nishant replied.

"You will have to come with us," the other one added, his tone firm and curt.

Nishant fell silent.

Knowing the reason for their visit he quietly followed the policemen out of the tent.

His blank face surprised his parents.

"Where are your other friends?" The policeman asked.

"Sir, I did it alone," Nishant replied.

"Not here Pargal. Let him reach the police station, we will make him sing there," the other policeman seemed to have a cynical piece of advice for his colleague.

Shyama panicked. Looking towards Brijnath she was on the verge of breaking down.

"What has he done *Sahab*?" Brijnath asked.

"Your son has stabbed one boy today morning," he replied throwing a nasty look at Nishant before turning towards Brijnath. "And the boy's father has filed a complaint against him."

They began walking away with him.

Walking on the dirt track with one policeman holding his hand, Nishant looked remorseless.

Brijnath followed them.

People walked out of their tents, curiosity on their ever-gloomy faces palpable. Word of his deed in the morning had already spread among a few and a strong undercurrent of support could be felt in the air for him.

Some even tried to resist his arrest, but a few threatening words from the policemen were enough to scare off a bunch whose souls had already been battered by the circumstances.

They backed off, but continued following them.

Bansilal was sitting on his cot taking deep drags from his cigarette, reading a worn out, without spine copy of the book *Man's Search For Meaning*. Seeing the pandemonium from a distance he put the book down and watched carefully as the crowd approached.

Nishant slackened his pace, almost halting for a moment, as he passed Bansilal's tent giving him a thousand yard stare.

Bansilal was startled. Throwing his cigarette away, he instantly got up while calling out to Dulaari, but by the time she came out he had already joined the crowd leaving her dazed and gaping.

After a brief struggle with the crowd at the entrance to the police station, Nishant was taken inside.

Looking towards him Bansilal was feeling helpless. *Another promising young life wasted*, his heart cried.

Nishant was detained in the lockup where three ruffian looking boys were already hauled up. In their early-twenties, they could not hide the amuse on their faces on seeing a teenager amongst their midst.

“Hey kid, why are you here?” one of them asked. He looked like their boss because of the authoritative tone of his voice.

Nishant ignored him.

“Since you have just come from outside you must be having some cash on you,” he said. “Give me that.”

“Give him *Bachche*, he can be quite nasty, trust me,” another boy intervened. His impish grin was giving away his intents though.

Nishant continued his silence.

The leader came closer to him, just inches away from his face, trying to intimidate him. “Give me the money. Those policemen will anyway take it from you,” he said.

Nishant stared him in the eye for a moment before trying to turn away. The boy placed his hand on Nishant’s shoulder stopping him in his tracks and smacked him, hard.

“*Uncleji*, this is a serious matter. The boy’s parents have filed a case. I can’t do anything,” the policeman told Bansilal.

“Sir, please. He is a nice boy, believe me, I know him since he was a small child. He can’t even hurt a fly,” Bansilal said.

Brijnath was watching from a distance as Bansilal was trying to negotiate Nishant’s release. He had managed to get access to the inspector In-charge and engage him in talks. After about ten to fifteen minutes of what looked like intense cajoling, Brijnath finally saw him smiling.

“*Uncleji* I am doing it only because of my respect for you, but not a penny less than five hundred,” the inspector said

“Thank you sir,” Bansilal grinned and looked at Brijnath.

Suddenly a policeman came rushing towards the inspector and whispered something in his ear.

The inspector smirked. “*Uncleji* are you sure you are not wasting your money on this boy. I mean he is not your son,” he said. “And worse, he seems to have the potential of becoming our regular guest.”

Not missing the taunt in his voice, Bansilal knew at once that policeman had given him some new information on Nishant.

“Why?” He asked instinctively “I mean why sir. What happened?” He changed his tone.

“Please narrate the same thing to *Uncleji*” the inspector told the policeman.

A few minutes back when the boy had slapped Nishant

In his fury, without any warning, Nishant jumped in the air landing a punch square on his nose.

Caught completely off guard, the boy was shell-shocked.

Not allowing him to gather himself Nishant quickly bent down punching him on his ribs- twice. Moving swiftly, he took a sharp step back before lunging and head butting him. The boy was now wobbling on his feet.

Nishant was still fuming though. Holding him by his hair he kicked him on the abdomen before clutching his head in his arms. He was not even letting him fall on the floor. As the boy was struggling Nishant bit his ear, hard, almost cutting through it making him wail in pain.

The unexpectedness as well as the brutality of the assault left his friends stunned. Like rabbits caught in the headlights, they stood close against the walls not daring to cross paths with his rage.

In desperation, they finally began calling out to the policemen outside "Sir, this boy has gone mad. Please help us."

Nishant however was not done yet. Before the policemen could open the cell door, he ran towards the steel bars knocking the boy's head against them.

Squirming on the floor the boy began yelping in agony.

The policemen entered the cell and started beating Nishant with their bamboo Lathis while one of them rushed out to notify the inspector.

Bansilal was aghast.

"Sir please do not beat the poor boy," he pleaded with the inspector.

"*Uncleji*, the boy has raised the bar. Now five hundred won't be enough. The case has worsened. I will need minimum one thousand Rupees to shut the case and mouths of colleagues such as these," he said, winking at the policeman.

Bansilal thought for a while before giving his consent "Okay sir, I will give."

"*Uncleji* I will release him, but out of respect for you I would like to tell you that you may be wasting your money on a lame horse," he said, "I am sure he will be again here within next few days."

Bansilal turned pensive. He looked at him for a while before speaking.

"*Betaji, sorry I mean sir,*" he corrected himself. "We have been the subjected to the most gruesome form of torment not only in the recent history, but over centuries now. We have been sufferers of the worst kind who have been let down by our own friends, our own neighbors, our own country and now

finally by our own Gods as well. All of them,” he said. “We have to now find hope ourselves and within us only, however faint or small that may seem it has to be protected at all costs. This boy is my hope, our hope and even if I am proven wrong, so be it. But, if there is just a remotest of possibility of me being right, then I think we don’t have a choice. Do we?”

The inspector thought for a while before asking the policeman to bring Nishant.

Nishant was badly bruised, his shirt torn with Lathi marks accentuating the exposed parts of his body. There was not a crease on his deadpan face though as he looked at Bansilal.

The inspector observed Bansilal’s horrorstricken face before turning towards Nishant.

“Listen kid, I am leaving you this time because of this *Uncleji*, but if I catch you doing any roguery again I will publically thrash you and drag you here,” he said. “Understood?”

Seeing no expression on Nishant’s face he reiterated by raising his voice. “UNDERSTOOD?”

Nishant looked towards Bansilal who gestured to him to nod. He nodded.

“Thank you sir. By evening I will get the money,” Bansilal said, trying to divert his attention towards himself.

“Don’t bother *Uncleji*, I am aware about your plight; this time I want to go with your conviction. After all you have seen more life than me,” he said. “But *Uncleji*, try not to even come here if something like this happens again. Please.”

A faint smile adorned Bansilal’s tense face. “I won’t *Betaji*. Promise,” he said, not correcting himself this time.

They left.

The policeman standing behind the inspector, came closer to him.

“Sir, you let them go so easily?” he asked him. “I mean the boy seems to be quite dangerous, sir.”

The inspector smiled. “Pargal, are we supposed to think only with our brains? Can’t policemen also use their hearts sometimes?” he said.

Pargal simply nodded his head not sure as to what reply would please his boss.

“We spend so much time with rogues and criminals that any truthful voice lands differently on our ears, at least on my ears. This old man somehow struck a chord with me. He seemed genuine to me Pargal,” the inspector said.

Pargal nodded at his boss, but his face did not project any conviction.

Realising his quandary the Inspector smiled while shaking his head a little.

“Okay Pargal, you forget that old man, I will make it simpler for you. Do you have a sister?”

“Yes sir, two.”

“And where do they live?”

“Sir they live with me only. Both are younger than me,” he replied.

“And you don’t live on the road. I mean you live in a safe house. Right?”

“No sir. I mean yes sir,” Pargal said. The qualm in his tone conveying his surprise at his boss’s statement.

“Pargal, then you should understand that boy’s anger better than me. Because I don’t have a sister,” he said. “Put yourself in that boy’s shoes who lives with his family literally in the open and has to protect them from prying eyes. Twenty-four by seven.”

Pargal nodded. "Yes sir. Got it," he said. "But sir, Bhatial *Sahab* has filed an FIR," he added.

"Tell that bastard to withdraw or I will make his puppy rot inside for attempt to rape. I know that family inside out," he said. "And yes, we have just lost a thousand rupees. See to it that Bhatials make up for this loss." His wink made Pargal beam from ear to ear.

An awkward silence between them engulfed their walk back to the camp. After walking for some distance Bansilal broke the ice.

"Brijnathji you go back to the tent," he said, "I will take a walk with Nishant."

"But his clothes are torn and he has wounds on his body," Brijnath replied.

"Don't worry Brijnathji that should be the least of our concerns right now," Bansilal said.

Brijnath looked at him, his eyes speaking a thousand thoughts. Bansilal nodded while closing his eyes to comfort him. He understood a worrying father's apprehensions.

Coming closer he kept a reassuring hand on Brijnath's shoulder. "He will be fine, trust me," he said, "I will get him in half an hour."

Brijnath placed his hand on his hand, giving it a gentle yet desperate squeeze before leaving.

Nishant and Bansilal walked to the end of the camp. Bansilal however did not stop there, he walked further entering the brick kiln. Walking up to one large pile of bricks, which was almost two storeys tall, he began climbing it through steps made from protruding bricks.

Though puzzled, Nishant did not utter a word and followed him in obedience through those precarious steps till they reached the top of the pile. Once there Nishant could no longer hold himself. “Why have we come here Bansi uncle?” he asked.

Bansilal turned around and looked towards the camp.

“From here you can have a clear picture of the despair we all are staying in,” he said, choosing not to reply his query straightway.

Nishant was startled at the sight.

The place provided a panoramic view of the camp.

Running his hands through his hair in frustration he looked all around at the cramped rows of tents encompassed with filth and decay on all sides.

“This place looks even more wretched from here,” he turned towards Bansilal, his voice choking with sadness and fright.

Bansilal came closer to him, placing his hand tenderly on his shoulders. “Now you tell me *Beta*, how do we come out of this wretchedness?” he asked, his tone calm, unruffled by Nishant’s exasperation.

Though taken aback at the unexpectedness of the query Nishant remained silent.

The old man has gone nuts, he thought. He still thinks we can come out of this forsaken land of hopelessness and misery.

“What are you thinking *Beta*?” Bansilal jolted him out of his thoughts.

Nishant looked him in the eyes. “Bansi uncle do you really think that we can come out of something like this?” he said, pointing towards the camp with dejection writ large on his face. “Don’t you think that we might be closing our eyes to reality. Our fate has been sealed, we are doomed.”

Bansilal, who was listening patiently to him, walked up to the edge of the porch and stood there, facing the camp.

He was quiet. His quietness, creating an uncomfortable air, was making Nishant fidgety.

Finally, after a long anxious spell of silence he spoke.

“ You know *Beta*, I agree with you to the extent that we are in a bad situation, rather a miserable one,” he said. “But a thinking that our fate has been sealed or that we are doomed is way off the mark. I do not think so and neither should you say that. Ever,” he said. “As long as we are breathing we can create our own situations from no matter how bad a situation we are presently in.”

Taking a breather he took out a cigarette. Tapping it on the back of his hand while shaking his head a little he lit it before turning around to face Nishant.

“Nishant, you think life has not been fair to you. Go out there and trust me you will still meet people whose misfortune will make your calamity pale in comparison. At least you have your family and can rebuild your life. There are people in this world who don't even get that chance and still they brave whatever comes their way.”

Though he was listening with apt attention Bansilal could sense that Nishant was not getting convinced. His face and uneasy body language were giving it away.

But Bansilal also was dogged. Having taken an instant liking for the boy he had taken it upon himself to not let a bright star from the community wane away in abyss of sorrow and despair.

“Look Nishant, anyone can steer a boat when the waters are calm and weather is sunny, but a real sailor is the one who steers his boat through

rough weathers. Yes, it is not going to be easy but *Beta* you don't have an option," he said.

"Isn't it easier to quote all these boisterous quotes, but it's quite another thing to implement them," Nishant blurted out in frustration, his edginess gradually coming to the fore.

"What resources do we have that can save us from a sure annihilation? I do not trust anyone now. Government, God or anyone," he said.

Bansilal heard him while giving him a long patient stare and taking deep drags from his filter-less cigarette, almost finishing it.

"Well, you are alive that is a resource good enough," he said with a faint smile camouflaged behind the smoke coming out of his mouth and nostrils. "And no one is asking you to trust anyone. I only want you to trust yourself."

"But Bansi uncle how will these things help when I am not able to even think straight?" Nishant asked.

"Well, for that you will have to hold on to the only arsenal you have to fight these conditions," Bansilal said. "And channelize all your negativity and anger towards strengthening of that one arsenal."

Nishant tweaked his brows.

"Which direction Bansi uncle and what is this arsenal you are talking about. I am not able to fathom?" he asked, his sobered tone hinting towards a registration of what he was hearing.

Bansilal could sense Nishant's gradual increase in his attention. A smile flashed on his face. Taking out another cigarette from his pocket he gestured to Nishant to sit on a nearby small pile of bricks while as usual tapping his filter-less cigarette on the back of his hand. He seemed to be enjoying Nishant's coming around.

“Now tell me Bansi Uncle what is my arsenal?” Nishant asked, his tone showing subtle signs of restlessness.

Bansilal lit his cigarette.

“Well, your arsenal is education, studies,” he said. “And If you channelize all your negative energy, your anger, your frustration rather your everything towards strengthening of this one resource, trust me *Beta* not only will you leave this camp, you will reach shores which you would never have dreamt of.”

Nishant was all ears. Conviction in Bansilal’s words was not letting him drift away. He was gradually beginning to comprehend that what Bansilal was talking might have the potential to alter his destiny.

Bansilal took a long deep drag from his cigarette before throwing it away.

“This one weapon *Beta* could encircle a safety web around you in such a manner that nothing can touch you. Nothing,” he said. “Yes It will require herculean efforts but trust me it is going to be worth it. Just give it your all,” he said. “I know you were a very good student. Spend all your waking hours only on studying. God has taken away your childhood and you are not fortunate to enjoy like other kids of your age, but don't let anyone take away your future from you. Not even God.”

He paused to light yet another cigarette.

“*Beta*, you can use this weapon to become a force of nature and destroy whatever miseries are waiting to cross your way.”

The statement shook Nishant. His eyes widened but he continued listening.

Bansilal could sense his discomfort. Taking three to four quick puffs of his nicotine dose he qualified his statement.

“Yes, I feel our miseries have just begun and many more are yet to come. Stand tall, stand brave with this weapon and trust me you will eventually win,” he said. “These fears, frustrations and fights are temporary outlets and will only throw you further down the dark abyss we already are in. In the end you would have gained nothing, but life would have slipped by,” he said.

Finishing his cigarette, he paused for a moment before turning a little to throw the butt away. In the meantime, Nishant got up and hugged him even before he had properly turned back.

Though taken by surprise Bansilal was overwhelmed. Clearing the heavy lump in his throat he also put his arms around Nishant.

“ Promise me *Beta*, you will hold on to this weapon and never leave it, come what may,” he said, rubbing his back with affection.

“I promise Bansi uncle, I promise,” Nishant said, his voice cracking as he held on to him.

Bansilal realized that he had never felt such warmth in a hug since his father’s death. His eyes finally defied him as tears rolled down his cheeks breaking the imaginary dam of mettle he had tried so hard to build all this while.

Choking on his own tears he began coughing.

“Bansi uncle, can you please quit smoking? You smoke too many of them.”

Bansilal smiled through his teary eyes. “*Beta*, I want to smoke a Marlboro before I give it up. You get me one when you start earning, I shall leave after that.”

“You mean another five to six yea...” He did not finish his sentence and understood that Bansilal had just foxed him.

Shaking his head in exasperation, Nishant too smiled.

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