

UTTHANA

The Stories of Rising



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Set in Georgia.

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Prologue

There is a word in Sanskrit for what happens after the fall. Not recovery. Not healing, though it holds both. Utthana — the rising up, the standing again, the body lifting itself from the ground it was thrown to.

No one teaches this motion. It cannot be taught. It is learned the way a child learns to walk after the first fall — not by understanding gravity, but by forgetting to be afraid of it.

This is one such rising.

A boatman in Varanasi who watches the river take his boats and, for a long season, refuses to build another. What he finds, when he finally opens what he could not bring himself to open, is not the ending he expected.

This is not a story about overcoming. Overcoming suggests an enemy, a battle won, a flag planted on the other side of pain. This story is quieter than that. It is about what the ground feels like, and what a person finds there if they stay long enough to look.

Krishna tells Arjuna, on a battlefield he does not want to fight on, that the self which grieves is not the self

which acts. He does not tell him grief is wrong. He tells him to stand anyway, and lift the bow.

That is utthana. Not the absence of the fall. The lifting of the bow.

What the River Gives Back

Assi Ghat, Varanasi

The flood took eleven boats and left one plank standing upright in the mud, driven there like a spear.

Vishwanath found it three days later, when the water had gone back to being a river instead of a hand that closed over everything. He did not pull the plank out. He stood there and looked at it, his jaw tight, and did not move until Meera called him twice.

His workshop was gone. Forty years of it. The good chisels, the steam box he had built with his own father, the half-finished boat he had promised to the Mishras before Diwali. All of it under brown water somewhere between here and Patna, or buried in silt, or simply not existing anymore in any form a man could touch.

He was sixty-one years old. He did not build another boat that season. Or the next.



His granddaughter Meera came to sit with him some evenings, on the steps above where the workshop used to be. She was nine and did not yet know how to be careful with silence, so her questions came direct, expecting answers.

“Nana. Why don’t you build?”

He would shrug. Once he said, “Nothing to build with,” which was not true. The timber merchants still had wood. It was not wood he lacked.

She stopped asking after a while. She would just sit, kicking her feet against the stone, watching the boats that other men still rowed, the ones that had not been in the water’s path.

He watched her watching them. Something in his chest moved each time, but he could not have said what.



It was Meera who found the trunk. Going through what could be salvaged from the flooded storeroom above the workshop, the one room the water had not fully claimed. She dragged it out into the light, coughing at the dust, and called for him without knowing what she had.

“Nana. Whose is this? It has Nani’s name.”

Ganga. Painted in his own hand on the lid, twenty years old now, the paint gone the color of weak tea.

He had not opened it since she died. He had told himself there was no reason to. He knew what was inside.

He was wrong about that, as it happened.



Ganga had drawn boats. Not the boats he built — narrow, deep-keeled, built for the current the way his father had taught him and his father before that. Hers were different. Wide and shallow. Two hulls joined by a frame, light enough to lift.

He remembered these drawings. Or he remembered dismissing them. She used to show him, evenings, spreading the paper across the low table while he ate. Look, it would float even half-full. It would not fight the water, it would sit on top of it. He had laughed, gently, an old master's laugh at a beginner's mistake. This is not how boats are built, Ganga. She had rolled the paper up and not shown him again.

He had thought she stopped drawing them.

The trunk held forty-three sheets. Each one dated. The last was three weeks before she died.

On the back of that one, in her small hand: For the year the river takes everything. So he is not afraid to lose it again.

He sat on the floor of the ruined storeroom without moving, the paper flat against his knees.



“Nana. Why are you crying?”

He had not noticed he was. He wiped his face with the back of his wrist, the same motion he used for sweat.

“Your Nani,” he said. “She was cleverer than me.”

Meera considered this with the seriousness only a nine-year-old can produce. “Everyone says you are the best boat-builder on the ghat.”

“I built what my father built. She built what the water needed.” He touched the drawing, the thin line of the double hull. “I did not listen.”

Meera picked up one of the sheets, turned it sideways, upside down, examining it with the seriousness children give to things adults have decided are serious. “Why didn’t you tell her you kept them?”

He had no answer that fit in a sentence. Pride, he might have said. Or shame, which is pride’s brother. Or simply that some men do not know how to say I was wrong until the person who was right is no longer there to hear it, and by then the not-saying has become its own kind of house, and you have been living in it so long you forget there is a door.

“I don’t know,” he said instead. It was closer to true.



He built the first one from driftwood. The Mishras had already sent an advance, embarrassed by his grief,

insisting he take it before he'd even asked. He set the money aside. The river had scattered its own materials along the ghats for a mile in either direction — planks, beams, the splintered bones of other men's boats. He wanted the new boat made from what had been taken and returned. Not bought. Given back.

He worked from her drawings. Twenty years old, and they were right. The double hull sat high and stubborn on the water, unbothered by the current that had drowned his workshop.

It took him four months. Meera sat with him most evenings now, handing him nails, asking what each measurement meant, and he found that explaining a boat to a nine-year-old was not so different from listening to a wife you had stopped listening to.



He named it Ganga, which was not very imaginative, everyone said so, the river already had that name. He did not care.

The morning he launched it, Meera sat in the bow, gripping the sides, delighted and unafraid. It floated the way the paper had promised. Light on the water instead of fighting it.

He rowed her out past the ghats, past the place where his workshop used to be, past the plank still standing

in the mud like something that had refused, all this time, to fall down. The city went by on both sides, all its temples and its dying and its washing of clothes, all of it continuing the way it always had, the way it would continue after him too.

Meera trailed her hand in the water. "Nana. Will you build more like this?"

"Yes," he said.

"Can I help?"

He looked at her small hand cutting through the current, and at the drawings rolled in a cloth bag at his feet, forty-two sheets left, each one a boat he had not built yet.

"You already are," he said, and pulled the oar, and the boat went on, light, unafraid, carrying them both across water that had once taken everything and was now, simply, water again.

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About the Author

Krishna Boon writes quietly about the largest things. Not as a scholar of any one tradition, but as a systems thinker who kept finding the same structure underneath scripture, physics, and the ordinary griefs of ordinary people.

The spiritual is simply the scientific not yet discovered. Manifestation is memory of creation.

Krishna Boon lives between stories, and is always listening for the next one.



Enrico Sanna