

Barefoot

The retreat began exactly as planned. Aparna found this reassuring. The transport had worked. The food had arrived. Twenty-two women had signed up, and by ten o'clock all twenty-two were standing inside a farmhouse two hours outside Delhi.

The evidence suggested a good beginning. The farmhouse offered something less measurable. Open fields surrounded the property. Trees interrupted sightlines. Stone pathways wandered wherever they pleased. Nothing appeared particularly interested in structure.

Good. That was the point.

The Udaan team had spent weeks preparing the weekend. Not to recreate another conference room outside the city, but to remove the familiar protections of one.

Inside the open-sided pavilion, twenty-two chairs stood in a wide circle. No tables. No projector. No stage. No carefully branded banners reminding anybody why they had come. Only the women and, beyond them, a large patch of grass.

Most had arrived carrying notebooks. Several appeared ready for instruction. One woman near the front seemed to be searching for a screen. Another kept glancing at the empty wall behind Aparna, as though something might yet be projected onto it.

The woman near the front frowned. "Excuse me."

Aparna smiled. "Yes?"

"Is this the workshop?"

The room laughed.

"That's what I'm trying to determine," another participant muttered.

The laughter came again, louder.

Aparna nodded. "It is."

The woman looked at the place where a screen should have been. “No projector?”

“No.”

“No presentation?”

“No.”

“Then what exactly are we doing?”

Aparna looked around the circle. Twenty-two women looked back at her, curious and suspicious and slightly concerned, a few with pens already uncapped.

“Let’s find out.”

The answer produced several exchanged glances. Good. Notebooks stayed shut on laps. Nobody looked particularly enlightened. The workshop hadn’t begun and the women already seemed unsure whether one existed.

Aparna placed her notebook beside her chair and began to take off her shoes, one at a time, with a deliberation that quietened the room.

The women watched.

She lined the shoes up beside her chair.

A woman laughed. “What are you doing?”

Aparna smiled. “I’ve spent enough of my life in conference rooms.”

More laughter. After a brief hesitation she lowered herself into the chair and tucked her feet underneath her. Not at the front, not standing, not presenting.

Inside.

“You’re serious?”

“Unfortunately.”

The laughter spread more easily this time.

Aparna looked around the group. “For the next two days, nobody has to impress anybody.”

Silence.

A few women exchanged glances. It sounded suspiciously simple.

“No networking.”

A woman frowned at once. "That's disappointing."

The room laughed.

"No elevator pitches."

More laughter.

"No introductions that begin with your job title."

One participant raised an eyebrow. "How will anyone know I've been successful?"

Aparna pointed at her. "We'll take that risk."

The room relaxed, just slightly. Aparna looked around the circle again. The grass. The trees. The women. The uncertainty.

"Let's start somewhere else." She waited for the shuffling to stop. "What does money mean in your house?"

Nobody answered. The neem trees moved overhead.

Eventually a woman in her fifties spoke. "Security."

It came out at once, with no hesitation.

"Security from what?" Aparna asked.

The woman turned her bangle once around her wrist. "Depending on somebody."

Several heads nodded.

"Stress," said another woman.

The room erupted. It was the fastest agreement of the morning.

A third participant tilted her head. "Freedom."

"Arguments," a fourth offered.

More laughter.

"That too," Aparna said.

Shoulders came down from where they had been sitting. Then a voice came from somewhere near the back, quiet and almost reluctant.

"Silence."

The laughter stopped.

Aparna looked up. "What do you mean?"

The woman shrugged. "When there isn't enough money, everybody talks about it. When there is enough money, nobody does."

The room grew thoughtful. Somebody nodded, slowly.

Another participant raised her hand. "I don't think money is actually my problem."

Aparna looked towards her. "What is?"

The woman took longer to answer than anyone expected. "I think I'm waiting."

The room shifted.

"Waiting for what?"

"I don't know."

She laughed at herself. "That's the frustrating part."

A few people smiled.

"Permission," said another participant.

Heads turned.

"What?"

"I keep thinking somebody needs to tell me it's okay."

"Who?"

The woman stared at the grass beyond the pavilion. "My husband, maybe. My parents. I don't know." She shook her head. "They probably aren't even thinking about it."

A woman across the circle laughed.

"I know that one."

"Me too," somebody else said.

The room became unexpectedly animated, voices overlapping. Aparna's notebook still lay closed beside her shoes, its pages of careful handwriting suddenly beside the point.

A woman in her forties, in a yellow kurta, leaned forward. "I've wanted to start a business for six years."

Several people looked over.

"What kind?"

"Catering."

"Why haven't you?"

The woman laughed. "I'll tell you when I figure it out."

More laughter.

“No, really.” She shrugged. “I keep taking courses.”

“How many?”

She counted on her fingers, lips moving.

“Seven.”

The room exploded.

“Seven?”

“Seven.”

“Were they useful?”

“Very.”

“Then why haven’t you started?”

The woman smiled, a little sadly. “Because every course convinces me I need one more course.”

The circle went quiet. Aparna reached into the grass for her notebook and wrote the sentence down. Not for the workshop. For herself.

Another participant raised a hand. “I had the opposite problem.”

Everyone turned.

“What do you mean?”

“I knew absolutely nothing.”

The room laughed.

“So I started.”

“What?”

“Everything.”

The laughter grew louder.

“That sounds reckless.”

“It was.”

“And?”

The woman laughed. “I wasted quite a lot of money.”

“That sounds more believable.”

“I also learned.”

“What?”

The woman thought about it, then shrugged. “Mostly what not to do again.”

The room laughed. Aparna smiled and left it there. Nobody reached for a phone. Nobody checked the time. When one conversation weakened, another began before Aparna could look towards the agenda.

Eventually someone from the team appeared at the edge of the pavilion and pointed towards the lunch tables. Aparna looked at her watch. They were forty minutes late. She looked around the circle. Nobody appeared hungry enough to care.

A woman beside her leaned over. "Are we in trouble?"

"Severe."

"For missing lunch?"

"For destroying my schedule."

The woman grinned. "I'm sorry."

"You don't look sorry."

"I'm not."

Women kept talking as they drifted towards the food. Small groups formed on their own, merged and formed again.

One participant came over to Aparna while the others moved towards the tea. "I nearly cancelled this morning."

"Why?"

"I woke up and thought, what am I doing going to a farmhouse with twenty-one strangers?"

"Reasonable question."

"I was halfway through sending the message."

"What stopped you?"

"My cab arrived."

Aparna laughed. "That's it?"

"That's it." The woman looked towards the lawn, where someone was already moving two chairs into the shade. "I'm glad it had."

Then she went to join the others. Aparna stayed where she was for a moment, barefoot in the emptying circle. Her notebook remained on the grass.

The bonfire happened because nobody wanted the day to end. That was the official explanation. The truth was simpler. Nobody wanted to leave the conversation.

The fire sat in the middle of the lawn, throwing sparks towards the neem trees. Blankets appeared. Tea appeared. Stories appeared. The same mysterious force seemed responsible for all three. Aparna sat slightly outside the circle with her tea. Not facilitating. Listening.

For a while people talked about ordinary things. Children. Parents. Career changes. The absurdity of Delhi traffic. Safe subjects.

Someone asked a woman across the fire whether she had ever gone back to work after having children.

"I tried."

"What happened?"

"I hated the job."

A few women laughed.

"That wasn't the answer I expected."

"It wasn't the answer I expected either."

"Did you leave?"

"Yes."

"And?"

The woman pulled the blanket higher around her knees. "And then I spent two years wondering if I'd made a mistake."

Someone laughed softly. "That's not very inspiring."

"No."

The woman smiled. "But it's true."

"Was it a mistake?"

She considered the question. "Some days."

A louder laugh moved around the fire.

"Helpful."

"You asked."

Nobody tried to improve the answer.

A little later, someone said, "If nobody could judge your decision, what would you do differently?"

The fire cracked. The conversation vanished. For several seconds nobody spoke.

"I would've left years ago," a woman said.

Nobody asked what she meant.

"Same," said a voice from across the circle.

"Definitely."

Someone laughed softly.

"Apparently we've all been living the same life."

The laughter that followed sounded different.

"What stopped you?" someone asked.

The first woman stared into the fire.

"I kept thinking I'd know when it was time."

"Did you?"

"No."

"So what changed?"

The woman poked at the edge of the fire with a stick, although nobody had asked her to. "Honestly?"

"Please."

"Staying got worse."

Nobody laughed. She dropped the stick beside her chair.

"That's it."

Across the circle, another woman spoke. "I don't know what I want."

No one interrupted. She rubbed both hands around her cup.

"Everyone keeps asking what I'm going to do next. I don't know. I just know I don't want what I have now."

"That's allowed," somebody said.

The woman looked up. "It doesn't feel allowed."

Nobody answered. The fire shifted again. Someone added another piece of wood. Aparna found she was no longer watching whoever spoke. She was watching the faces of the people listening.

One woman stared into her tea. Another rested her chin on her knees. Two people on the far side of the fire had pulled their chairs closer together without anyone appearing to notice. Nobody had asked Aparna what came next. Somebody fed the fire. Somebody else refilled a cup that was not her own. The conversation moved somewhere else.

Aparna let it.

The next morning, before breakfast, Aparna came out to find several women already awake. One was making tea. Two were sitting barefoot on the steps. Three others had pulled chairs into the first patch of sun.

The woman who wanted to start a catering business was talking to the woman who had wasted money starting something she did not understand. Aparna could not hear what they were saying. Nobody looked towards her when she arrived.

She poured herself tea and sat down. Nothing was scheduled. No session was running. No slide deck existed. The retreat continued anyway.

Weeks later, while going through photographs, Aparna stopped at one. A cluster of women sat barefoot on the grass, mid-laugh, mid-sentence, a hand frozen in the air. Nobody was looking at the camera. No agenda. No programme. No workshop in sight.

At the edge of the frame lay a heap of shoes nobody had come back for. Aparna looked at the photograph for a long moment.

What Was Being Built?

| *The programme had ended. The conversations hadn't.*

