

Lifting the Floor-boards



*(inspired by the recent cases of
AI induced redundancies and the anguish among my friends)*

The notice came on a Tuesday, which Vasu thought was needlessly cruel. Mondays are for shocks; Fridays are for mercies. But Tuesday left you with the whole week still ahead and nowhere to put your grief.

He sat in the glass-walled conference room that he had fought for two promotions to earn the key to, and across from him sat a woman half his age whose title

he did not recognise — "People Experience Partner" — and she spoke the word "redundant" as though it were a medical term, gentle and clinical, the way one says "benign" before saying "but."

"Your role, Vasu, has been restructured around the new AI-assisted workflows," she said. "The decision is not a reflection of your performance."

He wanted to laugh. Not a reflection of his performance. Twenty-three years of performance. Twenty-three years of early mornings and late nights and the quiet erosion of every dinner, every weekend, every small ordinary hour that other people spent with people they loved, in exchange for a seat in this glass room where a stranger was now telling him that a machine could do what he did.

He signed the papers. He took the cardboard box they gave him — they always gave you a box, as though you were a child being sent home from school with a project — and he walked through the open-plan floor

where his team sat. Ninety people. He had hired most of them. They looked up, and then they looked down, quickly, the way one does at a funeral when the coffin passes.

No one said goodbye. That was the part that broke him, in the end. Not the money, not the title, not the severance letter with its careful language. It was the ninety down-turned faces.

At home, the flat was silent. It was always silent at this hour — 3 p.m. on a weekday, the hour that belonged to no one, when the city held its breath between the lunch rush and the evening commute. Vasu had not been home at this hour in years. He stood in his kitchen and did not know what to do with his hands.

His wife, Meera, was at her bookkeeping work in the back room. She came out when she heard the door.

"You're home," she said. Not a question. She had known before he did, perhaps. Wives know. They feel the change in the household the way animals feel weather.

"It's done," he said.

She held him, and he let himself be held, and he hated that it felt unfamiliar — the shape of her, the particular pressure of her arms. When had he last stood still long enough to be held?

For three days he did not leave the flat. He slept in fragments. He opened his laptop and stared at LinkedIn, where strangers posted things like "Thrilled to announce..." and he closed it. He rehearsed phone calls he did not make. He ate toast.

On the fourth day, Meera said, carefully, the way one speaks to a convalescent: "Arjun called. From college."

Their son. Arjun. Twenty-one years old. Vasu opened his mouth to ask the automatic question — which college, what's he studying — and then he closed it again, because he did not know the answer, and to ask his wife would have been to admit something he could not yet bear to admit.

He had missed it. He had missed all of it. The choosing of the college, the first day, the homesick calls in the first term, the subject changes, the small crisis that Meera had managed alone while he was in a meeting about quarterly targets in a city he could not now remember.

He went to the bookshelf and found a photograph. Arjun at sixteen, in a school blazer, grinning in the way that only the young grin — as though happiness were a certainty. Vasu held the photograph and felt the weight of a specific kind of failure, the kind that does not appear on any performance review.

That evening he did something he had not done in

years. He walked.

Not to anywhere. Just walked, through the streets of his neighbourhood and around the local park, which he now saw he had never properly seen. There was a bakery he had driven past ten thousand times and never entered. At the park where an old man sat on the same bench every evening feeding pigeons, and Vasu thought: that man has done this for years, and I have not once stopped.

He stopped. He sat on the next bench and watched the pigeons assemble in their disorderly congregation, and the old man glanced at him.

"First time?" the old man said.

"First time," Vasu admitted.

The old man nodded looking at the pigeons: "They come whether you're here or not. The world goes on. That's the comfort of it."

It was a small thing. But Vasu held it the way one holds a coin found in a coat pocket — an unexpected small mercy.

Over the following weeks, things began to happen to him, or perhaps he began to notice things that had always been happening.

He went to the Ayyppan temple on a weekday morning — a weekday, imagine — and the priest, an old friend of his late father's, said, "Vasu. We haven't seen you for a long time. Come." And he sat Vasu down in the courtyard and gave him tea and spoke of nothing in particular, and when Vasu rose to leave, the priest said: "Your father used to sit here on Thursdays. He said the office would run without him, but the courtyard wouldn't."

Vasu walked home very slowly.

He called his son Arjun. Not with a rehearsed speech, not with the brisk efficiency of a man who has ten minutes between meetings, but late in the evening, with no agenda, and he said, "Tell me about your course. I want to hear all of it."

There was a pause — the pause of a son surprised to be asked — and then Arjun talked for forty minutes about computational linguistics, about a professor he admired, about a project on machine translation of endangered languages, about how he had found a way to love a subject. And Vasu listened, truly listened, and understood that his son had become a person while he had been away becoming an executive, and that this person was more interesting and more whole than any version Vasu had imagined for him.

At the end of the call, Arjun said, "Dad, are you okay?"

"I'm learning to be," Vasu said. "For the first time, properly."

He took up the things he had laid down, or that he had never quite had the courage to pick up. He had always loved verse — as a young man he had written it, badly and happily, and given it up when an older colleague had laughed. He began to write again, sitting in the bakery with a notebook, and the owner, asked him one day what he was writing, and he said, truthfully, "I don't know yet. That's the point."

He read the Gita, not as obligation but as conversation, and found in it the line that had always been waiting for him: *You have a right to action, never to its fruits.* He had spent twenty-three years chasing the fruits. The tree, he now saw, had been bearing all along.

He served in the local community centre. He also began to teach — voluntarily, one evening a week, at a community centre, helping recent immigrants with their English and their CVs. He discovered that he loved teaching. He loved the specific humility of admitting, again and again, "I don't know — let's find

out." The classroom was the opposite of the glass-walled conference room. There, his authority had been a function of his salary. Here, it was a function of his willingness to be present.

Oneday, some consulting work came to him unsolicited, the way good things sometimes do once you stop straining for them. A former colleague, now at a mid-size firm, needed someone who understood large-team operations and was willing to work two days a week. Vasu said yes, and set the terms himself — two days, no more, no weekend emails, no "availability" — and was astonished to find that the world accommodated him. The world, he learned, will take whatever you offer and ask for more; the skill is in what you decline.

The money was enough. Not the money of glass rooms and boxes and quarterly targets, but enough. Enough to live, enough to send Arjun a little extra, enough for a holiday with Meera to a coast they had talked about

for fifteen years and never visited.

They went at last. They stood on a cliff and watched the sea do its ancient, indifferent, comforting thing, and Meera said, "You're different."

"I'm the same," he said. "I've just stopped pretending to be someone else."

She took his hand. He let her. He did not check his phone.

On a Thursday evening — for it was always Thursdays now, his day for the temple courtyard — the old priest said to him: "You know the story of the man who searched the world for a treasure and found it under his own floor?"

"I do," said Vasu.

"And?"

"And I am only now lifting the floorboards."

The priest laughed, a full, delighted laugh, and the sound of it carried across the courtyard, and Vasu sat in the last of the evening light and felt, for the first time in years, that he was not running late for anything. There was nowhere to be. There was only here, and here was enough.

Mee. Ra

Mee. Rajagopalan

24 Sep 2026

rajag@gmail.com



www.meenalaya.org