CASE FILES · AGES 8–12

The Second Look Club

Ten mysteries that teach your child to think twice

TEN CASES · TEN THINKING SKILLS
SOLVE THEM ALONE. GET ONE WRONG ON PURPOSE.

You are going to get one wrong.

That is not a warning. That is the plan.

Every case in this book has a trap in it. Somewhere in the story there is an answer that feels *completely* right — obvious, even. Most people take it. You will probably take it too, at least once, and when you turn the page you will find out why it was wrong.

That moment is the whole book. It is a small, slightly annoying jolt, and it teaches your brain something no amount of being told could ever teach it: **the feeling of being sure is not the same as being right.**

Once you have felt that a few times, something changes. You start pausing. You start checking. You start saying *wait* — and *wait* is the most useful word a thinker owns.

How to use this book

Read the case. Look at the evidence. Then stop. Do not turn the page. Write your answer down first — properly, in the space provided, in actual words. An answer in your head is slippery and will quietly change shape once you find out you were wrong. An answer on paper cannot cheat.

Then turn the page and find out what happened.

You do not need anyone's help. You do not need the internet. Everything you need to solve every case is printed in front of you. If you get stuck, read the evidence again — it is always in there, usually in the piece that looked boring.

One case a day is plenty. Ten days, ten skills. Then the certificate at the back is yours, and you will have earned it, which is the only way a certificate is worth anything.

MEMBERSHIP

The Detective's Oath

Every member of the Second Look Club signs this. Dadi Bimla insists. She says a rule you have written your name under is much harder to wriggle out of, which is entirely the point.

I PROMISE, ON MY HONOUR, THAT

1. I will write my answer down *before* I turn the page.
2. I will not decide who did it until I have read every clue.
3. I will say "I don't know" when I don't know. It is not a weakness. It is accurate.
4. When I am proved wrong, I will say so out loud, and I will not sulk about it for more than about a minute.
5. I will remember that the boring clue is usually the important one.

DETECTIVE'S NAME _____ DATE _____

"Rule four is the hard one. Everybody thinks it's rule three." — Dadi Bimla

YOUR CLUB

Who is Dadi Bimla?

She is seventy-eight. She lives on the third floor of a building in Pune with a ceiling fan that clicks once every rotation and a great deal of paper. She drinks her tea far too strong.

For thirty-one years she did a job she will not describe, for people she will not name, and she is extremely irritating about both.

Now she runs the Second Look Club, which has one rule for joining: you have to be wrong in front of her at least once, and you have to admit it.

She sets the traps in these cases herself. On purpose. She wants you to fall in — once, safely, on paper, where the only thing it costs you is a bit of pride — so that you never fall into the same one out there, where it costs considerably more.

She says this is the kindest thing anybody ever did for her.

"Being wrong is not the problem, beta.

Staying wrong is the problem."

THE TEN CASES

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Answer key, parent's guide and your certificate are at the back — and no, going to the back first does not count, and yes, she will know.

01

CASE FILE 01

The Missing Tiffin

Sunrise Public School, Pune

> *A tiffin box disappears. Everyone already knows who did it.*
> *That is exactly the problem.*

SKILL: SEEING IS NOT KNOWING

The Missing Tiffin

Aarav had been talking about the puran poli since the school bus.

He told Meera about it. He told the bus driver about it. He told a pigeon about it. His aai had made it that morning, the good kind, with extra ghee, and it was sitting in his steel tiffin box with the blue lid, and lunch was four hours away and he was not going to survive.

At 1:00 he opened his bag and the tiffin box was gone.

By 1:04 the whole class knew. By 1:06 the whole class had solved it.

“Rehan,” said everybody. “Obviously Rehan.”

Rehan Kulkarni sat two rows behind Aarav. He was famous for two things: eating very fast, and standing extremely close to other people’s food while making a face like a hungry crow. Last month he had eaten half of Ishani’s dhokla when she went to sharpen a pencil.

And Meera had seen him. During games period, when the classroom was empty, she had come back for her hairband and there was Rehan, standing at the back row, right next to Aarav’s bag.

So that was that.

Except Dadi Bimla says the most dangerous moment in any case is the moment everybody agrees.

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

THE BAG

Aarav's bag sat under his desk, back row, from 9:00 until 1:00. He did not open it once.

THE EMPTY CLASSROOM

Games period ran 11:00 to 11:20. Three people came into the empty classroom: Ishani (hairband), Rehan (his geography textbook), and Sarita-tai, who swept the floor and emptied the class bin.

THE WITNESS

Meera saw Rehan standing at the back row, near Aarav's bag, at about 11:10.

THE DISCOVERY

At 2:00, Ishani found an empty steel tiffin box with a blue lid in the big bin behind the canteen. "That's his!" she shouted. Aarav agreed. Everybody agreed.

THE BOX IN THE BIN

It was completely clean. Not a crumb, not a smear of ghee. It looked washed.

AARAV'S ACTUAL BOX

Aarav's box has his name scratched into the steel on the bottom, in wobbly letters he did himself in Class 2. The box from the bin has nothing scratched on the bottom.

THE MORNING

Meera carried Aarav's bag up the stairs that morning because he was busy describing puran poli. She said, "your bag's light today." He said, "you're just getting strong."

STOP HERE

Before you turn the page, write down who took the tiffin — and the one piece of evidence you are trusting most.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

Almost everyone says Rehan. Let us look at exactly what Meera saw.

Meera saw Rehan **standing near the bag**.

That is what she saw. Now here is what the class did with it: they decided Rehan **opened the bag and took the tiffin**.

Read those two sentences again. They are not the same sentence. One of them is a thing a person saw with their eyes. The other is a story added on afterwards.

Nobody saw Rehan open the bag. Nobody saw Rehan hold the box. Nobody saw Rehan eat anything. What actually happened is that Rehan was standing somewhere — in a classroom, next to some furniture — which is a thing every human being does approximately all day.

He came back for his geography textbook. His desk is two rows behind Aarav's. To reach it you walk past the back row.

But there is a bigger problem with the case, and it is hiding in the bin.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

Nobody took the tiffin. There was never a tiffin in that bag.

Start with the box everyone was so sure about.

It was **washed clean**. Think about that for one second. You have just secretly stolen a friend's lunch. Do you (a) drop the box in a bin, or (b) carefully wash it first, dry it, and then walk it across the school to the canteen bin? Thieves are in a hurry. Thieves do not do the dishes.

And then the fact that settles it: Aarav's box has his name scratched into the bottom. The box from the bin has **nothing scratched on the bottom**.

So it is not his box. It is somebody's ordinary washed-out box, in a bin, where washed-out boxes go. The whole investigation was built on top of a box that had nothing to do with anything.

Now go back to the staircase. Meera carried the bag that morning and said it felt light. Aarav laughed it off. That was the real clue, at 8:40 in the morning, before there was even a case.

The puran poli never left the kitchen counter. His aai had set it down to answer the phone. Aarav grabbed the bag and ran for the bus, still talking about it.

There was no thief. There was no crime. There was a hungry boy, an ordinary bin, and a classroom full of people who were very sure.

VERDICT

No theft occurred. Rehan Kulkarni is innocent, which is the most that can be said for a boy who once ate half a dhokla that was not his.

SKILL 01 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

What you saw and what you decided are two different things.

There are two kinds of sentence, and mixing them up causes almost every wrong answer in the world.

Observation is what reached your eyes and ears. *Rehan was standing near the bag. The box was in the bin.*

Inference is what your brain added on top. *Rehan took the tiffin. That box is Aarav's.*

Inferences are useful. You cannot get through a day without them. The danger is when one slips past you wearing an observation's clothes — when you feel like you saw something you actually only decided.

The test is one question: **could I have taken a photograph of it?**

You could photograph Rehan standing near a bag. You cannot photograph Rehan being guilty.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

- → "She was staring at me" → photograph it? You can photograph where her eyes pointed. You cannot photograph *at me*.
- → "The teacher hates our class" → photograph it? You can photograph a frown. Hate does not photograph.
- → "My phone is missing so someone took it" → photograph it? You can photograph an empty pocket.

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

Vihaan's new water bottle is gone from the corridor rack. Ananya was seen at the rack at break. Ananya has a water bottle exactly like Vihaan's. Ananya and Vihaan had an argument on Monday.

Write down every OBSERVATION in that paragraph. Then write down every INFERENCE your brain tried to sneak in. There are more inferences than you think.

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: the distinction between observation and inference — the foundation stone of clear thinking, and the thing almost no school teaches directly.

The one question to ask at dinner: "Could you have taken a photo of that?" Use it on anything: a news headline, a rumour from school, something you said yourself. It works on adults too, which is occasionally embarrassing.

What it looks like when it transfers: your child starts saying "but how do we know that?" It will be annoying. It is supposed to be. In about a week it will be aimed at a WhatsApp forward and you will be glad.

02

CASE FILE 02

The Photograph

St. Xavier's High School, Mumbai

> *Twenty-nine students. One trophy. A photograph that gives everybody an alibi — and quietly destroys the whole case.*

SKILL: LOOK AT THE HOLE

The Photograph

The Inter-School Cricket Shield had lived in the glass case outside the staff room for eleven years. It was the size of a small dog and roughly the same colour as a two-rupee coin, and Class 7B walked past it every single day without looking at it once.

They looked at it on Tuesday, because it was gone.

The glass case was shut. It was not broken. It was not even locked, because the lock had been broken since 2019 and everybody knew it and nobody had ever needed to care.

Ma'am Fernandes took charge immediately, because Ma'am Fernandes takes charge of everything, including things that are already fine.

"The trophy was there yesterday," she announced. "I saw it yesterday. Today it is gone. Therefore it was taken today, between the first bell and now, and the only time this corridor was empty was during the class photograph. Every one of you was in that photograph. So one of you slipped away."

She held up the photo, printed that morning, still warm.

Twenty-nine students. Four rows. Everybody grinning except Aditya, who had blinked.

"Count them," she said grimly. "All twenty-nine. So one of you is a very good liar."

Dadi Bimla would have taken that photograph, held it at arm's length, and started smiling.

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

THE CASE

Glass case in the corridor outside the staff room. Lock broken since 2019. Not forced. Not damaged.

THE TIMELINE

Ma'am Fernandes states she saw the trophy "yesterday". The corridor was empty only during the class photo, 11:40 to 11:55.

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Taken 11:40, in the corridor, with the glass case in the background behind the back row. All 29 students present and accounted for.

THE BACKGROUND

In the photograph, behind the back row, the glass case is clearly visible. Inside it: two shields, a small silver cup, and the Class of 2011 group photo.

WHAT IS NOT IN THE BACKGROUND

The Inter-School Cricket Shield is not in the case in the photograph.

THE DUST

Inside the case, where the shield stood, there is a clean rectangle in eleven years of dust. The dust around it is undisturbed.

THE CUPBOARD

The school has a store cupboard behind the stage. Nobody has opened it since the Annual Day in December.

STOP HERE

Ma’am Fernandes says the thief slipped away during the photo. Write down why that cannot be true — and where you would look next.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

The whole class is busy staring at twenty-nine faces. Look behind them.

Here is what everyone does with that photograph: they count heads. Twenty-nine. Everyone present. So the thief must have been extremely quick, or extremely clever, or possibly two people at once.

They are studying the part of the picture that has people in it, because people are interesting and shelves are not.

But the photograph has a background, and the background has a glass case in it, and inside the glass case there are two shields, a small silver cup, an old group photo — and **an empty space where the Cricket Shield should be**.

The shield was already gone at 11:40, in the same instant the shutter closed on twenty-nine alibis.

Which means the entire theory — that it went missing during the photograph — was dead before Ma'am Fernandes finished saying it. The photograph she was using to trap the thief was in fact the thing proving the thief had already left.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

The shield was gone before the photo. And it was never stolen at all.

Two things break the case wide open, and both are things that are **missing**.

The first is the shield's absence from the photograph. That moves the theft to some time before 11:40 — and Ma'am Fernandes's "I saw it yesterday" is doing a lot of heavy lifting for a woman who walks past that case forty times a day without looking at it.

The second is stranger, and it is the one that solves it. Look at the dust.

Eleven years of dust inside a glass case, and a clean rectangle where the shield stood. Perfectly normal. But the dust **around** that rectangle is undisturbed. Not smeared. Not swept aside. No fingermarks, no drag marks, nothing.

You cannot reach into a dusty glass case, grab a trophy the size of a small dog, and lift it out without touching, sliding against, or disturbing a single millimetre of dust around it. Not in a hurry. Not while listening for footsteps.

Unless you are not in a hurry at all. Unless you have both hands free, all the time in the world, and permission.

The shield went to the engraver on Monday afternoon, to have last season's winners added to the base. Sir Dsouza took it himself, lifted it straight up with two hands, and wrote it in the office register on the line under "Items Out."

Nobody read the register. Everybody read the photograph.

VERDICT

No theft. The Inter-School Cricket Shield returned on Thursday with three new names on the base, one of them spelled wrong.

SKILL 02 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

Most people study what is in front of them. Detectives notice what should be there and is not.

Your brain is built to notice things that are there. A red bag on a grey road. A loud noise in a quiet room. That is excellent for staying alive and terrible for solving problems.

Almost nothing in your brain is built to notice things that are **not** there.

An empty space does not wave at you. Silence does not shout. A missing shield in the background of a photograph does not glow. You have to go looking for absences on purpose, every single time, because they will never come and find you.

So detectives ask a question that feels strange until you get used to it:

What should be here that isn't?

The name that never appears on the list. The one friend who did not ask what happened. The step in the instructions that quietly went missing. The dust that should have been smudged and wasn't.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

- → Reading a report about a shop: is the price mentioned anywhere?
- → Listening to an excuse: which part of the story did they skip straight over?
- → Checking a photo of a room: what was on that table yesterday?

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

A birthday party invitation lists everything: the date, the time, the address, the dress code, “no gifts please”, and a phone number for parents.

Something important is missing from that list, and about half of the guests will turn up confused because of it.

What is it?

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: attention to negative evidence — what Sherlock Holmes meant by the dog that did not bark. It is genuinely hard, it stays hard for adults, and it is the single highest-value habit in this book.

The one question to ask at dinner: “What’s missing from that?” Point it at a menu, a school notice, an advertisement, a friend’s story about why they were late.

What it looks like when it transfers: your child starts spotting what an advertisement carefully does not say. This is the beginning of not being sold things they do not want, which is worth considerably more than the price of this book.

03

CASE FILE 03

The Peacock in the Painting

Chandpol Bazaar, Jaipur

> *A two-hundred-year-old painting. A very good price. One small object in the background that should not exist.*

SKILL: SHAKE THE LADDER

The Peacock in the Painting

The shop was the kind that smells of dust and old paper and something faintly like cloves, and the man in it had a voice like warm oil.

“Two hundred years,” he said. “Minimum. From a haveli near Amber. The family fell on hard times.” He said the last part sadly, the way you might mention rain.

The painting was beautiful, and you did not need to know anything about paintings to see it. A courtyard at dusk. A woman in a red odhni sitting on a low wall. A peacock mid-strut across the stones, tail half-open, showing off to nobody. Behind them the wall of the haveli, and on that wall, hanging in a thin dark frame, a small portrait of an old man with a white moustache.

The paper was yellow and soft at the corners. There was a small water stain in the bottom left. It smelled genuinely old.

“Fourteen thousand,” the man said. “For you, twelve.”

Aunty Sujata had brought you along because you were, in her words, “the suspicious one.”

You looked at the peacock. You looked at the woman. You looked at the small portrait on the wall behind them, hanging in its thin dark frame.

And something went quietly wrong in your chest.

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

THE CLAIM

Painted approximately 200 years ago, near Amber, Jaipur.

THE PAPER

Genuinely yellowed. Soft, worn corners. A water stain, bottom left. Smells old.

THE SCENE

A courtyard at dusk. A woman on a low wall. A peacock, tail half-open.

THE WALL BEHIND

A small portrait of an old man with a white moustache, in a thin dark frame.

THE PORTRAIT ITSELF

Look closely. The old man's face is rendered in tiny grey dots and soft grey shadow — not brushstrokes. It is a photograph.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN INDIA

The first photographs were made in India in the 1840s. About 180 years ago — and it took decades after that before an ordinary family would have a framed photograph on a wall.

THE PRICE

Fourteen thousand, dropping to twelve without being asked. A painting genuinely two centuries old would not be sold from a bazaar shelf at that price.

STOP HERE

Something in this painting cannot be there. Find it, and write down what it tells you.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

You checked whether the painting looked old. That was never the question.

Here is what almost everybody does, including adults, including people with money to lose.

They test the painting. Is the paper yellow? Yes. Are the corners soft? Yes. Does it smell old? Yes. Is there an authentic-looking water stain? Yes. Conclusion: it is old.

Every one of those tests is a test of **whether the object looks old**. Not one of them is a test of whether it **is** old. Paper can be soaked in tea. Corners can be rubbed. Stains can be added with a wet thumb. Age can be applied, like paint.

You were standing there checking the top of the ladder while nobody checked whether the ladder was leaning against anything.

Underneath the whole visit sat an assumption so comfortable that nobody said it out loud: *things that look old are old.*

Take that away and there is nothing holding the shop up.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

A photograph is hanging on a wall in a painting made before photographs existed.

Look again at the small portrait in the thin dark frame.

It is not painted. The old man's face is built from tiny grey dots and soft grey gradients — the particular grey of an early photographic print, which no brush in 1825 could produce and no artist would have wanted to.

Photography did not exist in India two hundred years ago. The first photographs here were made in the 1840s, and it was decades after that before an ordinary household would have a framed photograph hanging on a courtyard wall.

So a painting supposedly made around 1825 contains, in its background, an object that would not be invented for another twenty years and not common for another forty.

The peacock is fine. The woman is fine. The paper is genuinely yellow and genuinely soft, because somebody worked hard on making it that way.

The painting is a good painting. It may even be an old painting — sixty, seventy years old. It is not a two-hundred-year-old painting, and the man in the shop knew it, which is why the price fell by two thousand rupees before anyone had begun to argue.

You did not catch him by knowing about art. You caught him by noticing one small object that had no business being in the room.

VERDICT

Not a forgery of a painting. A forgery of an age. Aunty Sujata paid four thousand, and only because she liked the peacock.

SKILL 03 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

Every conclusion stands on assumptions. Nobody ever checks whether they hold.

Every conclusion you have ever reached is standing on top of assumptions — things you did not decide to believe, you just never questioned.

Assumptions are invisible on purpose. If you noticed them all, you could not get out of bed. You assume the floor is there. You assume the bus goes where the board says. You assume the person on the phone is who they say they are.

Almost always, fine. But when a conclusion matters — when there is money in it, or a friendship, or your name — you have to go down the ladder and shake it.

The question is:

What am I taking for granted here — and what happens to my answer if it is wrong?

In this case: *things that look old are old.* Remove it, and twelve thousand rupees stops making sense.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

→ “They’re in uniform, so they work here” — what if they don’t?

→ “It’s written down, so someone checked it” — what if nobody did?

→ “She’s older, so she knows” — what if she’s guessing confidently?

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

A man phones your home. He says he is calling from the bank. He knows your father's name. He knows the last four digits of the account. He sounds calm and slightly bored, the way real bank staff sound.

He needs to confirm one small code that has just been sent by SMS.

Write down every assumption in that paragraph. Then write down which single one, if it is wrong, costs your family everything.

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: surfacing hidden premises — and the specific insight that testing whether something *looks* genuine is not the same as testing whether it *is*.

The one question to ask at dinner: "What are we taking for granted?" It works on holiday plans, on homework, on an argument between siblings, and on your own certainties.

What it looks like when it transfers: the bonus puzzle is a real scam, running in India right now, and it succeeds because of exactly one unexamined assumption. A child who has practised this in a bazaar in Jaipur is measurably harder to defraud at nineteen.

04

CASE FILE 04

The Broken Kite

Uttarayan, *A*hmedabad

> *A champion kite falls out of the sky. There is an excellent theory. It explains almost everything.*

SKILL: A THEORY MUST CARRY EVERY FACT

The Broken Kite

On Uttarayan the sky over Ahmedabad fills up like a bowl of confetti, and on the roof of the Panchal building it fills up mostly with shouting.

Jignesh had been building the black-and-orange kite since November. It had a bamboo spine he had shaved himself, thinner at the top, and it went up the way good kites go up, which is to say without arguing.

At 4:20 it was cutting through the sky like it had somewhere to be.

At 4:25 the manja went slack in his hands and the kite came down in three lazy loops, onto the terrace of the building opposite, in two pieces.

Everybody had a theory within about eleven seconds, and everybody's theory was Harsh.

Harsh had the roof next door. Harsh had lost to Jignesh last year and had been extremely unpleasant about it in the way that only a fourteen-year-old can be. Harsh had spent the whole morning flying a large green kite with a manja so sharp his mother had made him wear tape on his fingers.

At 4:25 Harsh was on his roof, holding his line, and had been for an hour.

It fits. It fits so nicely.

Dadi Bimla says a theory that fits nicely is the most expensive thing you can buy.

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

FACT 1

The manja went slack in Jignesh’s hands at 4:25, and the kite fell in loops — the way a kite falls when the line is cut.

FACT 2

Harsh was on the neighbouring roof at 4:25 with a large green kite and a very sharp manja.

FACT 3

Harsh had lost to Jignesh last year and had said several loud things about it since.

FACT 4

The kite came down in TWO PIECES. The bamboo spine had snapped clean across, about a third of the way from the top.

THE LINE

The cut end of Jignesh’s manja was found on the opposite terrace. It is frayed and fuzzy — pulled apart, not sliced.

THE WIND

At 4:24 a gust came across the terraces hard enough to knock over a plastic chair and a bucket on the Panchal roof.

THE SPINE

Jignesh shaved the bamboo spine himself to make it lighter, thinner at the top than a shop kite’s. He was proud of this. He mentioned it roughly nine hundred times.

STOP HERE

The popular theory is Harsh. Write down which of the seven facts it explains — and which one it cannot.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

Count how much of the evidence the Harsh theory actually carries.

Let us be fair to the theory, because it is a good one.

Fact 1: line went slack, kite fell in loops. A cut line does exactly that. Explained.

Fact 2: Harsh was there with a sharp manja. Explained.

Fact 3: Harsh had a reason to want it. Explained.

Three for three. This is the moment where every roof in Ahmedabad stops thinking, because the feeling of a theory clicking into place is genuinely one of the nicest feelings there is, and your brain will do almost anything to keep it.

Now **Fact 4**. The kite came down in two pieces. The bamboo spine had snapped clean across.

A kite fight cuts the **line**. That is the entire sport. Two lines saw against each other until one gives, and the losing kite floats away perfectly intact, which is why children run through the streets all afternoon catching them.

Cutting somebody's manja from thirty feet away does not snap the bamboo spine inside their kite. There is no mechanism. There is no way.

Three out of four is not a solution. Three out of four is a solution with a hole in it, and the hole is where the truth lives.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

Nobody cut anything. The kite broke, and then the line let go.

Look at the cut end of the manja. It is **frayed and fuzzy** — pulled apart under strain, fibre by fibre. A manja cut by another manja is sliced clean, like a snipped thread. This one was torn.

So the line was not cut. The line **tore**.

Now the gust at 4:24, one minute before the fall, hard enough to knock a bucket over.

And now the thing Jignesh had been boasting about since November: he shaved the bamboo spine himself, thinner at the top than a shop kite's. Lighter. Faster. Beautiful in the air.

And weaker.

The gust hit. The over-thinned spine snapped about a third of the way down, exactly where he had shaved it hardest. A kite with a broken spine stops being a kite and becomes a bag — it caught the wind all wrong, all at once, and every bit of that force went straight down the line until the manja tore in his hands.

Then it fell in loops, because a kite with a broken spine falls in loops, which was the one thing everybody read as proof of a cut.

Harsh was on his roof the whole time, flying his own kite, being annoying, which is not a crime.

The fourth fact was in front of everybody from the first second. It was lying on the opposite terrace in two pieces.

VERDICT

No sabotage. Cause of death: excellent craftsmanship, taken one shaving too far.

SKILL 04 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

Three out of four is not a solution. It is a solution with a hole in it.

When a theory explains most of the evidence, your brain does something quietly dishonest. It does not throw the theory away. It throws the **leftover fact** away.

It says: that bit is probably a coincidence. That bit does not matter. We will come back to that bit later. We do not come back to that bit later.

But evidence does not work like a school test where 75% is a good score. A theory either carries every fact or it is the wrong theory. One fact left lying on the floor is not a rounding error — it is the case telling you, politely, that you have got it wrong.

So before you commit, do the boring thing:

List every fact. Tick the ones your theory explains. Look hard at whatever has no tick.

The unticked fact is not the annoying part of the puzzle. It is the puzzle.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

- → An excuse that explains being late but not the wet shoes.
- → A diagnosis that explains the cough but not the rash.
- → A story about a broken vase that explains everything except why the cat was locked in the bathroom.

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

Your bicycle will not move. Theory: the chain has come off.

Facts: (1) the pedals spin freely, (2) there is a rattling sound from the back, (3) the chain is lying loose against the frame, (4) the back wheel will not turn even when you lift the bike and spin it by hand.

Which fact does the chain theory fail to explain? What does that one fact suggest instead?

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: resistance to premature closure — the habit of not stopping at the first theory that mostly works. This is the reasoning failure behind most bad decisions made by intelligent people.

The one question to ask at dinner: "Does that explain *everything*?" Then wait. The waiting is the important part.

What it looks like when it transfers: your child stops accepting the first tidy explanation — including yours. Fair warning: this case has a cost, and you will pay it the next time you are being slightly economical with the truth about why you were late.

05

CASE FILE 05

The Boat at Pallam Jetty

*A*lappuzha, Kerala

> *Every time one boy comes to the jetty, a boat comes loose. It has happened six times. He is about to be banned.*

SKILL: TOGETHER IS NOT BECAUSE

The Boat at Pallam Jetty

Pallam Jetty is four planks wide and smells of diesel and fish and the particular green smell of backwater, and Kuttan had been coming to it every Saturday since he was old enough to walk there alone.

He came to watch the boats. That was all. He was eleven and he wanted to be a boatman and he had strong private opinions about how each of them handled the turn past the coconut grove.

The trouble started in June.

On the fifth of June, Thomas-chettan's vallam came loose from its mooring and drifted forty feet before anybody caught it. On the twelfth, the same thing happened to Baby-chettan's. Then the nineteenth. Then the twenty-sixth. Then twice in July.

Six times. And every single time — every single one — Kuttan had been sitting on the jetty that afternoon.

By August the boatmen had stopped calling it a coincidence.

"Six times," said Thomas-chettan, not unkindly, but not kindly either. "Six out of six, mone. What are we supposed to think?"

Kuttan had not touched a rope in his life. He said so. Six out of six is a hard number to argue with.

Dadi Bimla has a rule about numbers like that. She says: before you decide A caused B, go and look for C.

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

THE PATTERN

Six boats came loose. Kuttan was present all six times. He has never been seen touching a mooring rope.

HIS ROUTINE

Kuttan comes to the jetty on Saturday afternoons. Only Saturdays. He is at school the rest of the week.

THE OTHER SATURDAYS

On two Saturdays in June and July, Kuttan had a fever and stayed home. On both of those days, a boat came loose. Nobody had mentioned this, because nobody had been counting the days he was absent.

THE MOORING POST

The old wooden post at the north end of the jetty is split down the middle. Ropes tied to it slip under strain. All six boats were tied to that post.

THE TIDE

The backwater runs highest on the spring tides, which fall roughly every two weeks.

THE FERRY

The Alappuzha–Kottayam tourist ferry began a new Saturday afternoon service on the 5th of June. It passes Pallam at speed and throws a heavy wake.

TIMING

All six boats came loose within about ten minutes of the ferry passing.

STOP HERE

Kuttan was there all six times. Write down why that is not evidence — and name the thing everybody forgot to count.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

Six out of six feels like proof. Here is the number nobody wrote down.

Six out of six is a genuinely impressive number and your brain will not want to let go of it. Let us look at what it is actually made of.

The boatmen counted the Saturdays when a boat came loose **and Kuttan was there**. Six.

They did not count the Saturdays when a boat came loose **and Kuttan was not there**. That number is two.

They did not count them because on those days there was nothing to talk about. A boat came loose, someone caught it, everybody got on with the afternoon. No boy on the jetty, no story, nothing to remember.

This is the oldest trap in the world and it catches everybody: **you only count the times that fit**. Not because you are dishonest. Because the times that fit are the only times you notice.

Once those two days go into the count, the pattern collapses. Boats came loose whether Kuttan was there or not. Which means his being there was never doing anything.

He was on the jetty every Saturday. If you stand somewhere every Saturday, you will be present for every single thing that happens on a Saturday, forever.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

A split post, a spring tide, and a new ferry that started on the fifth of June.

Something did change in June. It just was not Kuttan, who had been sitting there for years.

On the fifth of June — the exact date of the first boat — the Alappuzha–Kottayam tourist ferry started a new Saturday afternoon run. It passes Pallam at speed and throws a heavy wake down the jetty.

All six boats came loose within ten minutes of that ferry going by.

And all six were tied to the same thing: the old wooden post at the north end, split down the middle, where a rope under strain slips instead of holding.

So: a wake shoves the boat, the boat pulls the rope, the rope slips on a split post. On spring tides, when the water runs highest, it slips further and the boat goes.

Three ordinary things nobody was looking at, because there was a boy sitting right there, and a boy is much more interesting than a post.

Kuttan was not the cause. Kuttan and the loose boats were both effects of the same thing: **Saturday afternoon**. The ferry ran on Saturday afternoons. Kuttan came on Saturday afternoons. That is the whole connection.

Thomas-chettan replaced the post in September. Kuttan still comes every Saturday. Nothing has come loose since.

VERDICT

Kuttan of Pallam, cleared. The guilty party is a wooden post, and it has been replaced.

SKILL 05 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

Two things happening together is a question. It is not an answer.

When two things happen together, there are always four possibilities, and people almost always pick the first one:

1. A caused B. — *Kuttan loosened the boats.*

2. B caused A. — *Loose boats somehow summoned Kuttan.* (Silly here. Not always silly.)

3. Something else caused both. — *Saturday afternoon brought the ferry AND the boy.*

4. Nothing caused anything and you are looking at a coincidence you noticed and six thousand you did not.

Number 3 is the one that catches clever people, because it looks exactly like number 1 from the outside. The only way to tell them apart is to go looking for the hidden third thing.

And before any of that, do the boring arithmetic: **count the times it did NOT happen.** That number is always harder to find, and it is always the one that decides.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

→ “I wore this shirt and we won” — how many times did you wear it and lose?

→ “Ice cream sales and drowning rise together” — what third thing causes both? (Summer.)

→ “Every time I wash the car it rains” — how many washes were followed by sunshine?

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

A school notices that students who eat breakfast score higher in exams. The principal announces that breakfast improves marks.

Name one thing that might cause BOTH eating breakfast and scoring well — without breakfast doing anything to the marks at all.

Then write down what you would need to measure to find out which explanation is true.

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: correlation is not causation, plus the confirmation-bias trap of only counting confirming instances. Most adults can recite the first and still fall for the second.

The one question to ask at dinner: “How many times did it NOT happen?”

What it looks like when it transfers: your child starts hearing statistics on the news differently — and, more immediately, stops accepting “every time you do X, Y happens” as an argument. Including from you.

06

CASE FILE 06

The Honest Liar

Indiranagar, Bengaluru

> *Every single statement in this case is true. Check them all. You will still end up believing something that never happened.*

SKILL: TRUE SENTENCES, FALSE PICTURE

The Honest Liar

The Under-13 Inter-Society Football Cup came down to Brigade Meadows against Ashwini Layout, and Brigade Meadows won it four–two, and by Sunday evening everybody in three apartment complexes knew exactly how.

They knew because of Karthik's account, delivered at high volume on the compound steps, and Karthik never lies. Ask anybody. Karthik is famous for it. Karthik once told his own mother he had eaten the last laddoo when he could easily have blamed the dog.

Here is what Karthik said, word for word:

"Zoya was on the pitch the whole match. Zoya has scored in every single game this season. Brigade Meadows scored four goals. Two of them came from close range on the left, which is Zoya's side. And after the fourth goal, the whole team ran to Zoya and lifted her up."

By Monday everyone in Indiranagar knew Zoya had won the cup practically single-handed. Her name was in the society WhatsApp group. Somebody made a poster.

Zoya spent the whole of Monday looking like she wanted the ground to open.

Dadi Bimla read the statement twice and said: "Every sentence is true. Go and check them."

So you did. Every sentence was true.

And the story was still wrong.

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

STATEMENT 1 — TRUE

“Zoya was on the pitch the whole match.” Verified. She played all sixty minutes.

STATEMENT 2 — TRUE

“Zoya has scored in every game this season.” Verified. Every game — including this one.

STATEMENT 3 — TRUE

“Brigade Meadows scored four goals.” Verified. Final score 4–2.

STATEMENT 4 — TRUE

“Two came from close range on the left, which is Zoya’s side.” Verified. Two goals, close range, left.

STATEMENT 5 — TRUE

“After the fourth goal the whole team ran to Zoya and lifted her up.” Verified. Photograph exists.

THE SCORESHEET

Goal 1: Meher. Goal 2: Meher. Goal 3: Zoya, penalty. Goal 4: Meher. Meher scored a hat-trick, from the left, close range. She plays on the left too.

THE LIFT

They lifted Zoya because it was her last match before moving to Hyderabad. The team had planned it on Friday. It had nothing to do with the goals.

STOP HERE

Every statement is true and the conclusion is false. Write down HOW that is possible.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

You checked each sentence. You never checked the gaps between them.

Go back and look at how you tested that statement. You took each sentence, one at a time, and asked: is this true? Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Five for five. So the story must be true.

But a story is not just its sentences. A story is its sentences **plus the shape they make when you put them side by side** — and that shape is built out of what sits in the gaps, where nothing was said at all.

Look at sentence 2 again. “Zoya has scored in every game this season.” True. It is also true of a girl who has scored exactly one goal per game, every one a penalty. The sentence does not say how many. Your brain filled that in, generously.

Look at sentence 4. “Two came from close range on the left, which is Zoya’s side.” Every word true. It never says Zoya scored them. It puts *two goals* and *Zoya’s side* into the same sentence and lets you do the rest of the work yourself.

That is the trick, and it is not really a trick. Karthik never said a false thing. He arranged true things in an order, left out one name, and your own brain built the lie for free.

You cannot catch this by checking sentences. You have to check the **picture**.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

Meher scored three. Nobody said her name.

The scoresheet takes four seconds to read and destroys the entire story.

Goal 1: **Meher**. Goal 2: **Meher**. Goal 3: Zoya, from the penalty spot. Goal 4: **Meher**.

Meher scored a hat-trick. She plays on the left, close in — those are her two goals from "Zoya's side", and they were never Zoya's at all. Zoya scored one, from a penalty, which counts and matters and is not a hat-trick.

And the lift at the end? The team had planned it on Friday. It was Zoya's last match before her family moved to Hyderabad. It had nothing to do with the football.

Karthik's statement contains no false sentence and does not contain the word "Meher". That single absence is the whole crime.

Here is the part worth sitting with: Karthik was not being cruel. He genuinely does not lie. He told the bits he remembered, and what he remembered was Zoya, because Zoya is his neighbour and Meher is not.

You do not need a liar to end up with a false story. You need an honest person with a favourite.

VERDICT

Statement accurate. Story false. Correction issued to the society WhatsApp group; the poster was quietly taken down.

SKILL 06 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

Nobody has to lie to you. They only have to choose which true things to say.

Almost nobody who misleads you will say something false. That is amateur work — false things get caught.

The professional version is **selection**. Choose which true facts to say. Choose the order. Choose which name never comes up. Let the listener assemble the wrong picture themselves, out of parts that are all genuine.

And because they built it themselves, they will defend it harder than anything you could have told them.

So checking each sentence is not enough. Two more questions:

What picture is this making in my head? Say it out loud as one sentence. *"Zoya won the match."* Now go and check **that** — because it was never actually said, which means it was never actually checked.

Who is missing from this account? Somebody scored three goals and did not get named once.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

- → An advertisement: "Nine out of ten dentists surveyed." How many were surveyed? Who paid?
- → A school report: "Attendance has improved." From what to what?
- → A friend's story about a fight: whose words are quoted, and whose are only described?

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

A juice carton says: “No added sugar. Made with real fruit. No artificial colours. Doctors recommend fruit.”

Every sentence is true.

What picture is the carton building? What single number would collapse it?

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: detecting misleading-by-selection — technically true statements arranged to build a false impression. This is the mechanism behind most advertising, most political messaging, and roughly half of all sibling disputes.

The one question to ask at dinner: “Say the picture out loud — now, was that actually said?”

What it looks like when it transfers: your child begins reading packaging properly, and starts asking who is missing from a story. Of everything in this book, this is the skill with the longest reach into adult life.

07

CASE FILE 07

The Cricket Ball

Rajouri Garden, Delhi

> *A window is broken. A boy confesses immediately. The glass disagrees with him.*

SKILL: START AT THE END AND WALK BACKWARDS

The Cricket Ball

The window belonged to Mrs. Ahluwalia on the ground floor, and it had a small sticker of a cartoon lion on it that had been there since 2014, and now it had a hole in it roughly the size of a cricket ball.

Which was reasonable, because there was a cricket ball on her carpet.

Arjun confessed before anyone had even asked. He walked up to the door with his ears red and said he had hit it, he was very sorry, he would pay for it out of his Diwali money, and it had been a straight drive that got away from him.

Everybody believed him instantly. Arjun is the kind of boy who confesses to things, sometimes things he has not done, which his mother says is a beautiful quality and also extremely inconvenient.

Mrs. Ahluwalia was not angry, which somehow made it worse.

Dadi Bimla arrived, looked at the window for about four seconds, and then did something odd. She did not look at the hole. She got down on her knees on the grass **outside** the window and looked at the ground.

“Beta,” she said, “where is the glass?”

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

THE HOLE

Roughly cricket-ball sized, in the lower half of Mrs. Ahluwalia's ground-floor window.

THE BALL

A cricket ball, scuffed, on the carpet inside the room, about four feet from the window.

THE CONFESSION

Arjun says he hit a straight drive from the pitch, which is on the grass outside, roughly twenty metres away.

THE GLASS — OUTSIDE

There is a scatter of broken glass on the grass OUTSIDE the window, spread in a fan shape away from the house.

THE GLASS — INSIDE

There is almost no glass on the carpet inside. A few small chips near the frame. That is all.

THE ROOM

Mrs. Ahluwalia's sitting room. Her nephew Sameer, aged 15, had been in there alone all afternoon, practising with a tennis ball against the inside wall. He says he heard the crash and came running from the kitchen.

THE BALL AGAIN

The cricket ball on the carpet is dry. The grass outside has been wet since the morning sprinkler ran at 7am, and every ball played on it that day came back damp and green-stained.

STOP HERE

Arjun says the ball came from outside. Write down the one piece of physical evidence that makes that impossible.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

Somebody confessed. That is not evidence — it is a claim, like any other.

A confession does something strange to an investigation: it ends it. Everybody relaxes. The question is answered. There is nothing left to look at.

Which is why Dadi Bimla looked at the ground instead of listening to the boy.

Here is the thing about a confession — it is a **statement**. It is exactly as reliable as the person making it, and Arjun is a boy who once apologised for a power cut.

Glass, on the other hand, does not have feelings. Glass does not confess to things to be kind. Glass does one thing only: it goes in the direction it was pushed.

When something breaks a window, the glass sprays out on the **far side** from the impact. Hit from outside, glass lands inside on the carpet. Hit from inside, glass lands outside on the grass.

Now read clue four and clue five again.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

The glass is on the grass. The ball came from inside the room.

Run it backwards from the end.

Final state: glass fanned out across the grass *outside*; almost none on the carpet *inside*.

One step back: the glass travelled outward, away from the house.

One more step back: whatever broke the window was moving from inside to outside.

One more: the impact happened in the sitting room.

Arjun's story requires the ball to travel from the pitch, through the window, onto the carpet — which would have thrown glass **in**, all over that carpet. It is not there.

And there is a second, quieter proof. The sprinkler ran at 7am and the grass has been wet all day. Every ball played on that grass came back damp and green-stained. The ball on the carpet is **bone dry**. It has not been outside at all.

Sameer was alone in the sitting room all afternoon, throwing a ball against the inside wall. At some point he threw the cricket ball instead of the tennis ball, or threw it harder than he meant to, and the window went.

He said he came running from the kitchen. The glass says he was already in the room.

Arjun confessed because he heard a crash near a cricket pitch and assumed it was his fault, which is a thing he does about once a fortnight.

VERDICT

Confession withdrawn. Window paid for by Sameer, who also had to apologise to Arjun, which he found considerably harder than the apology to his aunt.

SKILL 07 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

When the story you are told does not work, run it in reverse and watch where it breaks.

Most of the time you think forwards: this happened, then this, then this, so the ending must be that.

Detectives do it the other way round, because the ending is the one part you can actually see.

You do not have to guess how the window broke. The window is right there. The glass is right there. It landed where it landed. Start from the thing that is definitely true and walk backwards one step at a time.

What is the final state? Glass outside.

What must have happened one step before? Glass moved outward.

And one step before that? Force came from inside.

Keep going until you reach the start — and if the story you were told does not join up with the story the evidence tells, you have found your break.

And a hard one, worth remembering: **a confession is a statement, not evidence.** People confess out of fear, out of loyalty, out of habit, or because they are the kind of person who apologises for the weather.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

- → A wet floor: which way do the footprints point?
- → A dead phone: what was it doing when it still had charge?
- → A missing chapter of homework: what did the last completed page look like?

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

You come home. The kitchen light is on. The back door is unlocked. There is one wet umbrella by the door and one dry one. Two cups in the sink, one still warm. The dog is shut in the bedroom, which never happens.

Start from the warm cup and walk backwards. How many people were here, and roughly when did each arrive?

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: backward reasoning from physical evidence, and — importantly — the idea that a confession is testimony rather than proof.

The one question to ask at dinner: "What must have happened *just before* that?" Then again. Then again.

What it looks like when it transfers: this is the shape of debugging, of medical diagnosis, and of every good repair. It is also, more immediately, how a child stops taking the blame for things they did not do — which matters more than it sounds.

08

CASE FILE 08

The Lucky Pen

Examination Hall B, Nagpur

> *The pen has worked four times out of four. Aditi is about to sell it for eight hundred rupees.*

SKILL: PATTERN, OR COINCIDENCE

The Lucky Pen

The pen was blue, slightly chewed at the top, and worth — according to Aditi Deshmukh, who was conducting the auction from the third step of the school gate — approximately eight hundred rupees.

“Four exams,” she said. “Four. Science: ninety-two. Maths: eighty-eight. History: ninety. Geography: ninety-four. All with this pen. Before this pen I was getting seventies.”

She held it up. It looked exactly like a pen.

“Rohan’s buying it for the boards,” she said, “unless someone goes higher.”

Rohan looked slightly ill but committed, the way people do at auctions.

Dadi Bimla was on the other side of the gate, waiting, allegedly for a rickshaw. She said one sentence without looking up.

“Ask her how many exams she has written this year.”

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

THE CLAIM

Four exams with the pen. Scores: 92, 88, 90, 94. Before the pen: “around seventy”.

THE FULL COUNT

Aditi has written NINE exams this year. She used the pen in six of them.

THE OTHER TWO

In the two pen exams she does not mention — Marathi and Computer Science — she scored 71 and 68.

THE NON-PEN EXAMS

In the three exams written without the pen this year, she scored 86, 91 and 74.

WHAT ELSE CHANGED

Aditi’s mother started sitting with her for one hour of revision every evening in July. The pen was found in August.

THE FOUR

The four exams she quotes are Science, Maths, History and Geography — the four subjects she has always liked best and always scored highest in, going back to Class 5.

THE PEN

Bought in a strip of five for sixty rupees. Aditi’s brother has the other four. His marks are unchanged.

STOP HERE

The pen is four for four. Write down why that number proves nothing, and what you would need to see instead.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

Four out of four. Now ask what happened in the other five.

Four for four is a real number and it is genuinely four for four. The problem is not the arithmetic. The problem is where the four came from.

Aditi did not write four exams. She wrote **nine**. She used the pen in six of them.

So she scored 92, 88, 90 and 94 with the pen — and also **71 and 68** with the same pen, in Marathi and Computer Science, which she did not mention. Not because she is a cheat. Because those two did not feel like part of the story, so they quietly fell out of it.

That is how every lucky object in history has ever been built: keep the hits, forget the misses, and by next week you genuinely do not remember there were any misses.

Then look at the three exams she wrote **without** the pen: 86, 91 and 74. Those are the same kind of numbers. A 91 with an ordinary pen is better than a 71 with the lucky one.

And now the two things that finish it off. The four exams she quotes are Science, Maths, History and Geography — the four subjects she has been best at since Class 5. And her mother started sitting with her for an hour of revision every evening in **July**. The pen turned up in **August**.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

The pen does nothing. The revision hour does almost everything.

Put all nine exams in one place and the shape of it changes completely.

With the pen: 92, 88, 90, 94, 71, 68. **Without the pen:** 86, 91, 74.

There is no pen effect there. There is a **subject** effect — she does well in Science, Maths, History and Geography and less well in Marathi and Computer Science, and she has done that consistently since she was ten. The pen was in her hand for both. It did not notice which exam it was in.

Then the timing. Her mother began an hour of revision every evening in July. The pen appeared in August. Something did change this year and it did change her marks — it just was not sixty rupees divided by five.

And the control group was sitting right there the whole time: her brother has the other four pens from the same strip. His marks are exactly what they always were.

Aditi is not lying. This is what a human brain does when left alone with a small number of memorable events. It finds a shape, because finding shapes is the thing it is best at, and it does not stop to ask whether the shape was really there.

VERDICT

Auction cancelled. The pen was returned to being a pen. Rohan kept his eight hundred rupees and has been unbearable about it since.

SKILL 08 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

Three is not a pattern. Three is three.

Your brain is a pattern machine. It is extraordinarily good at this, and it does not have an off switch. Show it three dots and it will draw a line through them and then defend the line.

That is why a run of four means much less than it feels like. Before you believe a pattern, ask three questions:

1. How many times in total? Four out of four is impressive. Four out of nine is a Tuesday.

2. What ELSE changed at the same time? A revision hour in July beats a pen in August.

3. Is there anything to compare against? Four identical pens in her brother's pencil case, doing nothing.

And the one that catches everybody: **you will remember the hits and forget the misses**, automatically, without deciding to. That is not dishonesty. That is just how memory is built. The only defence is to write things down while they are happening.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

- → "This medicine works — I felt better in three days." How long does the illness last on its own?
- → "Our team wins when I watch." How many times did you watch and lose?
- → "Every red light on this road is against me." Did you count the green ones?

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

A shop claims its hair oil makes hair grow faster. Six customers say it worked.

Write down three questions you would have to answer before believing it — and describe the fairest test you could run with two bottles, twenty people, and six months.

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: sample size, base rates, confounding variables and the control group — the actual bones of scientific reasoning, arriving inside a story about a chewed pen.

The one question to ask at dinner: “Out of how many?”

What it looks like when it transfers: your child starts asking for the denominator. This is the exact skill that separates people who can read a health claim from people who forward one.

09

CASE FILE 09

The Two Witnesses

Durga Puja, Bagbazar, Kolkata

> *Two witnesses. One is certain and detailed. The other is unsure and vague. The unsure one is right.*

SKILL: WHO COULD ACTUALLY HAVE KNOWN?

The Two Witnesses

Ashtami evening at the Bagbazar pandal is roughly forty thousand people occupying a space designed for four thousand, and somewhere inside that a small girl's red shoulder bag was taken off her arm.

Her name was Titir. She was seven. The bag had eleven rupees and a plastic dinosaur in it and it mattered enormously.

Two people came forward.

The first was Mr. Bhattacharya, who was magnificent. He gave a description immediately and did not hesitate once: a tall boy, seventeen or eighteen, in a bright yellow shirt, thin, with a phone in his left hand, who moved off towards the dhaki drummers. He repeated it three times without changing a word. He was completely certain.

The second was a woman called Ruma, who sells phuchka from a cart near the west entrance. She was not certain about anything. She thought maybe a boy. Maybe not tall. She could not say about the shirt because of the lights. She was sorry. She kept saying she was sorry.

Everybody wanted Mr. Bhattacharya to be right, because Mr. Bhattacharya was useful and Ruma was not.

Dadi Bimla asked one question, and she did not ask it about the boy.

She asked: "Where exactly were each of you standing?"

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

MR. BHATTACHARYA — POSITION

On the pandal steps, about forty feet from where Titir was standing, facing the idol — with his back three-quarters turned to the crowd behind him.

MR. BHATTACHARYA — CONDITIONS

Between him and Titir: an estimated three hundred people, two pillars, and a rotating spotlight.

MR. BHATTACHARYA — THE SHIRT

The pandal lighting on Ashtami evening was red and gold floodlight. Under red-gold light, white, pale green and pale yellow all read as yellow.

RUMA — POSITION

Her phuchka cart is four feet from where Titir was standing. Titir had been at the cart two minutes earlier.

RUMA — CONDITIONS

She was facing the crowd, at eye level with it, all evening. That is her job.

RUMA — WHAT SHE DID SAY

One thing, quietly, and only when asked twice: whoever it was “smelled of the sweet shop — the ghee smell, very strong.”

THE GHEE

There is one sweet shop with an open kadhai at the west entrance, thirty feet from Ruma’s cart. Anyone standing near it for more than a few minutes carries the smell in their clothes.

STOP HERE

Both witnesses are honest. Write down which one you would build the case on, and exactly why.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

You are grading them on confidence. Grade them on position instead.

Rank those two witnesses the way almost everybody does, and Mr. Bhattacharya wins easily. He is certain. He is detailed. He is consistent. He never wavers.

Ruma is unsure, vague, apologetic, and changes “maybe tall” to “maybe not tall”.

So you believe the confident one. Everybody does. Confidence *feels* like evidence.

It is not. Confidence tells you how a person feels about their memory. It tells you nothing whatsoever about whether they were in a position to form one.

So stop grading their manner and start grading their **position**.

Mr. Bhattacharya was forty feet away, on the steps, **facing the idol** — back three-quarters turned to the crowd. Between him and Titir: three hundred people, two pillars, a moving spotlight, and a red-gold floodlight that turns white, pale green and pale yellow all into the same colour.

He could not have seen it. Not because he is lying — he is certain, and he is sincere — but because the geometry does not allow it.

Ruma was **four feet away**, at eye level, facing the crowd, which is what she does for eleven hours a day.

One of them was standing where the thing happened. The other was standing where the story happened.

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

The vague witness was the only one who was there. And she gave the one detail that could not be invented.

Ruma's evidence is worth more than Mr. Bhattacharya's entire statement, for one reason: she was in a position to have any.

Four feet. Eye level. Facing the crowd. Titir had been standing at her cart two minutes earlier, so Ruma had already looked at her once.

And notice **why** Ruma is vague. She is vague about exactly the things that were genuinely hard — height in a crush of people, colour under a red-gold floodlight. Her uncertainty is not weakness. It is calibration. She is telling you precisely how much she knows, which is the single most trustworthy thing a witness can do.

Then, quietly, only when asked a second time, she gave the detail that broke the case: whoever it was smelled strongly of ghee. The open-kadhai sweet shop is thirty feet from her cart, at the west entrance. Stand near it for a few minutes and you carry it in your clothes for hours.

That is not a detail anybody invents. It is not visual, it is not dramatic, and it is not the kind of thing you would produce if you were trying to be helpful. It is the kind of thing you only have if you were actually, physically there.

The bag was recovered near the west entrance the same night, minus eleven rupees, dinosaur intact.

And Mr. Bhattacharya? Genuinely sincere. He had heard a commotion, turned, seen a boy in a yellowish shirt moving away, and his brain — helpfully, instantly, without asking him — assembled all of that into a memory of watching the theft. He was not lying. He was remembering something that never happened, which human beings do constantly and confidently.

VERDICT

Bag recovered. Ruma refused a reward and accepted, after some argument, that Titir would come and eat phuchka for free on Navami.

SKILL 09 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

Confidence is not knowledge. Ask what each person was in a position to see.

Not all evidence is worth the same, and the thing that decides is almost never how sure the person sounds.

Before you weigh what somebody says, weigh **where they were standing**:

Were they in a position to know? Close enough, facing the right way, at the right time.

What were the conditions? Light, noise, distance, how long they had.

What would they gain? Being useful counts as gaining something. So does being right.

Do they tell you the edges of what they know? A witness who says “I’m not sure about the colour” is telling you their other details are worth more, not less.

That last one is worth keeping for life. The person who says “I don’t know” about the parts they do not know is far more reliable on the parts they do than the person who is equally certain about everything.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

- → Two people describe a fight — who was in the room, and who heard about it after?
- → A review of a restaurant — did they eat there, or read about it?
- → A rumour about a teacher — trace it back. How many people between you and someone who was actually present?

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN

Four people tell you what the new principal said in the staff meeting.

A sat in the meeting. B was outside the door. C heard it from A. D read it in the class group and cannot remember who posted it.

Rank them. Then answer the harder question: under what circumstance might B know something A does not?

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: source evaluation and epistemic calibration — the difference between confidence and reliability, and why expressed uncertainty is a mark of a good witness rather than a weak one.

The one question to ask at dinner: “How would they know that?”

What it looks like when it transfers: your child starts tracing claims back to whoever was actually present. In a country with as much forwarded misinformation as this one, that habit is close to a life skill.

10

CASE FILE 10

The Case That Changed

Dadi Bimla's flat, Pune

> *Your first case comes back with one new fact. Everything you concluded was right. It is also no longer true.*

SKILL: CHANGE YOUR MIND ON PURPOSE

The Case That Changed

Dadi Bimla's flat smells of cardamom and old paper and there is a ceiling fan that clicks once every rotation, and she has put a single sheet of paper on the table in front of you.

"Last one," she said. "Read it."

It was a photocopy of the school lost-property register, Sunrise Public School, Pune. Case One. The tiffin.

You knew this case. You had solved this case. You had proved there was no theft at all: the box in the bin had no name scratched underneath, so it was not Aarav's; nobody washes a box they have just stolen; and Meera had said his bag felt light on the stairs that morning. The puran poli never left the kitchen counter. Clean, airtight, and you had been rather pleased with it.

Here is what was written in the register, dated four days after the case closed:

"Steel tiffin box, blue lid, name scratched on base — AARAV M. Found behind sports store. Handed in by Sarita Kamble, cleaning staff. Contents: empty."

You read it again.

His actual box. With his actual name on it. Found somewhere nobody had looked, four days later, empty.

"Well," said Dadi Bimla, and the fan clicked. "Now what?"

The Evidence Board

EVIDENCE

YOUR ORIGINAL CONCLUSION

No theft occurred. The tiffin was left on the kitchen counter at home.

YOUR ORIGINAL REASONING

(a) the bin box had no name scratched underneath, so it was not his; (b) it was washed clean, and thieves do not wash up; (c) Meera said the bag felt light that morning.

THE NEW FACT

Aarav's real box — name scratched on base — found behind the sports store four days later. Empty.

STILL TRUE

The bin box was not his. That reasoning was correct and remains correct.

STILL TRUE

Nobody washes a box they have stolen. Also correct.

NOW SHAKY

"The bag felt light." Meera said this while carrying a bag up a staircase, in passing, once. It is the weakest thing in the file and it was doing the most work.

THE SPORTS STORE

Behind the sports store is where the Class 6 boys eat things they are not supposed to have. It is not on the way to anywhere. Nobody goes there by accident.

STOP HERE

Every step of your original reasoning was sound. The conclusion is now wrong. Write down what you do next — and be honest about what you want to do.

Written it down? Good. Now turn over.

Here is the trap, and this time it is not in the case. It is in you.

Read what your brain is doing right now. Really — notice it. It has already started, and it will sound reasonable.

Maybe there are two boxes with his name. Maybe he scratched his name on a second box later. Maybe someone found it in the kitchen and brought it to school. Maybe the register is wrong.

Every one of those is possible. Every one is also doing the same job: **protecting a conclusion you have already announced**.

This is the last and hardest trap in the book, and it is not about tiffins. It is that once you have said a thing out loud — to a class, to a friend, to yourself — you stop being a person investigating a question and quietly become a person defending an answer.

And you will not feel it happen. It does not arrive as stubbornness. It arrives as extra cleverness, as ingenious little explanations that spring up exactly where they are needed.

Notice which parts of the file you want to re-examine. It is always the new fact, never the old conclusion.

Dadi Bimla's rule: **when you find yourself getting cleverer in order to stay right, stop. That is the sound of being wrong.**

So if it wasn't that — what was it?

SOLVED

Keep what still stands. Drop what does not. Say the new answer out loud.

Do it properly, one piece at a time.

What survives. The bin box was not Aarav's — no name on the base. Correct then, correct now. And nobody washes a box they have just stolen. Also correct. Those two pieces of reasoning were good and they stay in the file.

What breaks. Only the conclusion. "The tiffin never left home" rested almost entirely on Meera's remark about the bag feeling light — said once, in passing, while walking up a staircase, by someone not paying attention. It was the flimsiest thing in the file and it was carrying the whole roof.

What the new fact tells you. His real box, with his real name, empty, behind the sports store — which is not on the way to anywhere. Nobody drops a box there by accident. Somebody went there to eat something they should not have been eating.

The new conclusion. The tiffin was in the bag. It was taken during games period. It was eaten behind the sports store, and the box was dropped where the eating happened.

So there was a theft after all.

And here is the part that matters more than the answer: **this does not make your first investigation a failure**. You were right to reject the bin box. You were right about the washing. You reasoned correctly from what you had.

You were not wrong. You were **right with incomplete information**, which is the condition every detective works in, always, including this one, including your last one.

Being wrong is not the failure. Refusing to update is the failure.

(And Rehan? Still innocent. There was never any evidence against him, then or now. Notice that the new fact did not rescue the original accusation — it just proved a theft happened. Those are two different things, and half the class will get that wrong.)

VERDICT

Case One reopened and reclassified. Culprit never identified. Rehan Kulkarni remains innocent, and would like everybody to know it.

SKILL 10 UNLOCKED

What you just learned to do

The hardest evidence to accept is the kind that proves you were wrong.

This is the skill everything else in this book was building towards, and it is the one almost no adult has.

Changing your mind feels like losing. It is not. It is the only way anyone has ever got anything right.

When a new fact arrives that does not fit:

1. Separate the reasoning from the conclusion. Usually most of your reasoning is fine. It is the last step that has to go.

2. Find which piece was weakest. There is always one — the fact you accepted too easily because it pointed the way you were already going.

3. Say the new answer out loud, to a person. Out loud is what makes it real.

4. Watch for the cleverness. If your explanations are getting more complicated in order to keep your answer alive, your answer is dead and you are doing CPR.

Being wrong is not the opposite of being a good thinker. **Refusing to notice** is.

WHERE YOU WILL MEET THIS AGAIN

- → You were sure a friend ignored you. You then learn their phone was broken.
- → You were sure you knew the way. The road has been one-way for a year.
- → You were sure about a person, and then you met them.

CASE NOTES: YOUR TURN — THE LAST ONE

Think of one thing you argued about in the last month and lost — or should have lost.

Write down: (1) what you concluded, (2) which single fact your conclusion was really resting on, (3) whether that fact was strong or whether you accepted it because it pointed where you were already going.

You do not have to show this page to anybody. That is exactly why it works.

FOR THE GROWN-UP READING OVER A SHOULDER

What this case built: belief updating and the recognition of motivated reasoning — the capstone skill, and the rarest one in adult life.

The one question to ask at dinner: "What would change your mind?" If the honest answer is *nothing*, that is not a strong opinion. It is a closed one.

What it looks like when it transfers: the moment your child says "actually, I think I was wrong about that." It may take months. When it comes, do not make it a lesson — just say "good catch" and move on. Making it a big moment is how you teach them never to do it again.

And one for you: the fastest way to teach this is to do it out loud yourself, at the table, about something small. "I was sure the shop shut at eight. I was wrong." Children copy what they see far more reliably than what they are told.

NO PEEKING UNTIL YOU HAVE TRIED

Answers to the “Your Turn” puzzles

The ten main cases are solved inside the book. These are the smaller puzzles at the end of each case — the ones where you had to do the thinking yourself, with nobody holding your hand.

CASE 01 · THE MISSING TIFFIN

Case notes: your turn

Observations (things a camera could record): Vihaan's bottle is not on the rack. Ananya was at the rack at break. Ananya owns a bottle that looks like Vihaan's. Ananya and Vihaan argued on Monday.

Inferences (things your brain added): that the bottle was *taken* — it may have been moved, or knocked off, or never put there. That being at the rack means touching the rack. That owning a similar bottle means swapping them. That Monday's argument has anything at all to do with Thursday's bottle. And the sneakiest one: that a crime happened. Nobody has established that yet.

Four observations. At least five inferences. That is the normal ratio, and it is why people are accused of things they did not do.

CASE 02 · THE PHOTOGRAPH

Case notes: your turn

The venue. There is a date, a time, an address, a dress code, a phone number — and nothing that says whether it is at the house, the park, or a hall. The address alone does not tell you, because on invitations an address is often just where to RSVP.

The reason it is hard to spot is that the list is *long*. A list with six items on it feels complete. Your brain grades it on how full it looks, not on whether the one thing you actually need is in there.

Case notes: your turn

Assumptions in that paragraph: that the caller is who he says he is · that knowing your father's name means access to bank records (names are on doorbells, letters, social media) · that knowing four digits proves anything (they appear on receipts and old statements) · that sounding bored proves he is genuine (scammers sound bored on purpose) · that a code sent by SMS is something a bank would ever ask you to read aloud.

The one that costs you everything: the last one. Every other assumption can be wrong and you lose nothing. A real bank never asks you to read back an OTP. That single sentence is the whole defence, and it is worth teaching to every adult in the house too.

CASE 04 · THE BROKEN KITE

Case notes: your turn

Fact 4 breaks it: the back wheel will not turn even when lifted and spun by hand.

A loose chain explains the free pedals, the rattle, and the chain lying against the frame. It cannot explain a wheel that will not turn. If the chain is off, the wheel should spin *more* freely, not less.

A wheel that will not spin means something is jamming it — a brake stuck against the rim, or something wedged in the spokes or the gears. And that jam is probably what threw the chain off in the first place. The fact your theory could not carry turned out to be the cause of everything else.

Case notes: your turn

A third thing that causes both: a settled home routine. A household organised enough to get breakfast on the table every morning is usually also organised about bedtimes, homework and school attendance — and those are what move marks. Household income does the same job: it buys both breakfast and tuition.

What you would need to measure: take students from similar homes and similar past marks, and change only the breakfast. Give some breakfast at school and not others, keep everything else identical, and compare. If breakfast itself matters, the difference survives. If it was really the routine, it vanishes.

CASE 06 · THE HONEST LIAR

Case notes: your turn

The picture being built: this juice is healthy, and drinking it is like eating fruit.

The number that collapses it: the grams of sugar per hundred millilitres. "No *added* sugar" is a true sentence about what the factory put in. It says nothing about the sugar already in concentrated fruit juice, which is often as much as a soft drink.

Notice the shape of it: every sentence is true, and the crucial number is simply never mentioned. Nobody lied. "Doctors recommend fruit" is doing especially heavy work — doctors do recommend fruit. They are not recommending this carton.

Case notes: your turn

At least two people, and here is the order.

Work back from the warm cup: someone was drinking within roughly the last twenty minutes, so somebody was here very recently — and one cup is cold, so they did not arrive together.

The umbrellas: one wet, one dry. It has rained recently. The dry umbrella belongs to whoever arrived *before* the rain; the wet one to whoever arrived during or after it. Two arrivals, at different times.

The dog: shut in the bedroom, which never happens. Somebody shut it in deliberately — most likely because a visitor was coming who does not like dogs, or because the door was going to stand open. That was a decision, and decisions take a person.

So: person one arrives before the rain (dry umbrella), makes tea, shuts the dog away. Person two arrives after the rain starts (wet umbrella), has the second cup — the warm one. Both left through the back door, which is why it is unlocked. The one thing you cannot tell from this evidence is who they were, and a good detective says so.

Case notes: your turn

Three questions: Out of how many? Six people said it worked — six out of how many who tried it? · What else changed? Season, diet, age, a new shampoo, simply cutting hair less often. · How was it measured? "Feels thicker" is not a measurement; centimetres are.

The fairest test: take twenty people. Fill ten bottles with the oil and ten identical bottles with a plain oil that looks and smells the same. Do not let anybody know which they have — not the users, and ideally not the person measuring. Measure hair length in centimetres at the start and at six months, same method, same person, same ruler. Then compare the two groups.

The disguised bottle is the important part. People who know they got the special oil report improvement whether or not anything happened. That is not lying. That is how expectation works on everybody, including you.

Case notes: your turn

Ranking: A (present, heard it directly) · B (present-ish — outside the door, heard some of it, missed the rest) · C (one step removed, but from a good source) · D (unknown source, unverifiable, effectively worthless as evidence).

The harder question — when might B know more than A? Several ways, and they matter.

B might have heard what was said in the corridor *before* the meeting, or after it ended. B might have heard the tone of a private remark A was not meant to hear. And most importantly: A was *in* the meeting, which means A was involved — A has a stake, a role, and reasons to remember it a particular way. B was outside, with nothing at risk.

Being present is usually the best evidence. It is not automatically the best evidence. Ask what each person was positioned to know, every time.

Case notes: your turn — the last one

There is no answer key for this one, and that is deliberate.

The whole point is that nobody checks it. You are the only person who will ever know whether you were honest on that page — which makes it the only puzzle in the book that tests something other than cleverness.

If it helps, here is what a good answer looks like. Not: *"I was wrong about the film timing."* But: *"I said the film started at seven. I was really going on the fact that it started at seven last week, and I accepted that because I wanted to be right in front of my brother."*

The second version names the weak fact **and** the reason it got through. That reason is the thing worth knowing about yourself. Dadi Bimla says most people can find the mistake. Almost nobody can find why they let it in.

What this book was actually doing

Ten cases, ten skills, in a deliberate order. Each one builds on the one before it, and the last one is the hardest thing any of us ever has to do.

1–3 build the foundation: telling apart what you saw from what you decided; noticing what is absent; and finding the assumptions holding up a conclusion.

4–6 build rigour: insisting a theory explain every fact, not most of them; separating things that happen together from things that cause each other; and spotting a false picture built entirely out of true sentences.

7–9 build method: reasoning backwards from evidence rather than forwards from a story; telling a pattern from a coincidence; and judging a source by whether it was in a position to know rather than by how certain it sounds.

10 is the one that matters: updating a conclusion when the facts change, and recognising the specific feeling of getting cleverer in order to stay right.

Three things that make this work better, if you have the appetite:

Let them be wrong. The trap pages are the engine of the book. If you steer them towards the answer, you have removed the only part that teaches anything.

Use the dinner question. Each case has one. It takes eleven seconds and it is what moves the skill off the page.

Be wrong yourself, out loud. "I was sure the shop shut at eight. I was wrong." Children copy what they watch far more reliably than what they are told.

CUT THIS PAGE OUT. STICK IT SOMEWHERE YOU WILL SEE IT.

The Ten Questions

One question from every case. A real detective does not remember ten stories — she remembers ten questions, and asks them in order until something gives.

01 **Could I have taken a photograph of that?**

Tells apart what you saw from what you decided.

02 **What should be here that isn't?**

*A*bsences never wave at you. Go and look.

03 **What am I taking for granted?**

Every conclusion stands on something. Shake it.

04 **Does that explain EVERY fact?**

One fact left over means the theory is wrong.

05 **How many times did it NOT happen?**

Count the misses, not just the hits.

06 **Say the picture out loud — was that actually said?**

True sentences can build a false story.

07 **What must have happened just before?**

Start at the end and walk backwards.

08 **Out of how many?**

Four out of four, or four out of nine?

09 **How would they know that?**

Position beats confidence, every time.

10 **What would change my mind?**

If the answer is nothing, it isn't an opinion.

"If you only keep one, keep number ten." — Dadi Bimla

GRADUATION EXERCISE

Your Own Case File

Somewhere in your house, this week, something will go wrong. A thing will go missing. Someone will be blamed. A story will get told that does not quite add up.

That is a case. Work it properly.

The next three pages are a real case file. Use them on something that actually happened — not something invented. Invented mysteries are easy because you already know the answer. Real ones are hard, and hard is the point.

Two rules, and Dadi Bimla is strict about both:

One. Fill in the evidence *before* you write down who you think did it. Not after. The moment you name a suspect, your brain quietly stops collecting evidence and starts collecting proof, and those are not the same job.

Two. You must write down one thing that does *not* fit your theory. There is always one. If you genuinely cannot find it, you have not looked hard enough — go back and look again.

Good luck, detective.

What happened

THE CASE

What went wrong, in one sentence.

WHEN — AS EXACTLY AS YOU CAN

WHERE

WHO WAS THERE

Everyone. Including you. Including people who were only nearby.

WHAT EVERYBODY ALREADY THINKS HAPPENED

Write it down so you can catch yourself believing it.

The evidence

Only things a camera could have recorded. If you cannot photograph it, it belongs on the next page, not this one.

OBSERVATION 1

OBSERVATION 2

OBSERVATION 3

OBSERVATION 4

WHAT SHOULD BE HERE AND ISN'T

The hardest box on the page. Leave it blank only if you have really tried.

Your conclusion

MY THEORY

EVERY OBSERVATION IT EXPLAINS

THE ONE THING IT DOES NOT EXPLAIN

Compulsory. There is always one.

WHAT AM I TAKING FOR GRANTED HERE?

WHAT WOULD CHANGE MY MIND?

If nothing would, this is not a conclusion. It is a decision you have already made.

SIGNED

THE SECOND LOOK CLUB

Certified Detective

This certifies that

_____

has completed all ten cases, has been wrong at least once, has said so out loud, and has learned to ask the most useful question there is —

"Wait. Let me check."

SECOND
LOOK
CLUB