It's Our Small Big World

A Story of Love, Family, and the Choices We Make

GIJO J OZHAKKAL



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In loving memory

of

Jojo Mathew, Ozhakkal

Our Beloved Father

Who poured out his entire life for us,

Selflessly giving everything for us to thrive.

Who showed us the beautiful dreams of tomorrow,

Lighting the path ahead with hope and vision

Who shaped us into who we are today,

Nurturing our growth with unwavering love and guidance.

Through every hardship life brought,

We cherished those precious small moments of happiness,

We shared together – Simple joys that became our greatest treasures.

Dedicated to

Lini Gijo – My Wife

Eirene & Catherine – My Daughters

Together we made – Our Small Big World

&

My friends, teaching & non-teaching staff

of

St George College, Aruvithura

Who were part of my college life during the period

1997-2002

Foreword

The Weight of the Kitchen and the High Ranges

Some stories are told through shouting, but the ones that stay with us are the ones told in whispers. In my own cinematic journey, I have always been fascinated by what happens in the silences, the scraping of a coconut grater, the rhythmic steam of a pressure cooker, or the long, heavy look a woman gives a door she isn't allowed to unlock.

My own path into storytelling began many years ago with a tele-film that Gijo and I made together. It was a time of raw ambition and shared dreams, and as I read through **"It's Our Small Big World,"** I was instantly transported back to the nostalgic pulse of our college life – the protests, the shared teas, and the idealism that we carried like a shield.

In this novel, Gijo captures that same heavy air of our youth, but he grounds it in the mist-laden cardamom hills of Thopramkudy.

I was particularly struck by the metaphor of the **Curry Leaf**. In Kerala, we treat the curry leaf as a simple utility: it gives the sambar its soul, its fragrance, and its identity, only to be picked out and discarded the moment the meal is ready. For too long, this has been the story of our parents, and specifically, our mothers. Gijo gives a voice to that silence. Through the eyes of Sumi, we see a world where a daughter is a legacy to be guarded, while her own personhood is treated as a breach of discipline. We see Luckachen, a man whose "Military Iron" is both his greatest strength and his most tragic cage.

But what makes this novel special is the **Reconciliation**.

We live in a time of "Big Worlds" – global politics, corporate greed, and digital noise. But Gijo reminds us that our truest, most monumental battles are fought in "Small Worlds" – on family verandas, in parish halls, and through the agony of unanswered phone

calls. He shows us that a shared cup of ginger-honey tea can be a more powerful political statement than a rally in the town square.

This is a story about the "Small" things that are actually "Big." It is about the courage it takes to be a person when the world only wants you to be a prize.

I hope you find, as I did, that the mist of Thopramkudy feels remarkably like home.

Jeo Baby
Film Director
(The Great Indian Kitchen & Kaathal: The Core)

Acknowledgement

Writing this book has been a journey through the landscapes of my own life, and it would not have been possible without the people who make up my "Small Big World."

First and foremost, I want to thank my mother, **Molly Jojo**. Mummy, you have been the quiet, steady heart of our family. Your love and prayers provided the soil in which my dreams could grow. Thank you for teaching me that the simplest moments are often the most valuable.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my siblings. To my elder brother, **Sunil**, who led the last great strike at our college before I joined, thank you for showing me what leadership and courage look like. To my sister, **Tintu**, thank you for that fateful challenge about your school senior; you planted the seed that grew into this story. To my younger brother, **Jyothish**, thank you for standing behind me like a rock through every high and low of this process.

To my wife, **Lini**, and my daughters, **Eirene** and **Catherine**. You are my world. Lini, thank you for your endless patience and for always being ready with the frank, honest reviews I needed to hear. We truly made our family together.

I am especially grateful to my school friends **Mary Elizabeth Antony** & **Geetha Maria Joseph** and my "Army Brother" **Col Arun Thakur –** whose guidance after reading my early drafts and critical comments was the motivation that kept me moving toward the finish line.

Finally, a special thanks to my **BSc. Physics** batchmates at **St. George's College, Aruvithura.** The life we shared from 1999 to 2002 was the kind of college experience anyone would dream of, and those memories are woven into every chapter of this book.

To all of you, thank you for being the roots and the light of my story.

Regards

Gijo J Ozhakkal

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Some stories are shouted. This one is whispered.

I started this story with a question: How do we reconcile with the people we love when words fail us?

It's about the land we fight for, the families we disappoint, and the moments we choose to stand our ground or to bend. I wrote it for everyone who's ever loved someone they couldn't speak to, for the silences that say more than words, and for the girls who walk onto stages even when the world tells them to stay small.

In Kerala, where this story unfolds, politics isn't just debated in assembly halls, it's lived in college campuses, tea shops, and family verandas. And in the high ranges, where the air smells of cardamom and rubber, the land you inherit can feel heavier than the love you're allowed to choose.

Growing up in Kerala, I watched families like mine, where silence often spoke louder than arguments, where pride and love tangled like roots of the same tree. The conflict between Luckachen and Ittichen isn't just about two men; it's about what a family owes the land it inherits. The conflict between Luckachen and Giri isn't just about a daughter's marriage; it's about the choices that get forced on you when the world wants you to pick a side.

I wanted to write a story where reconciliation isn't earned through grand speeches or dramatic confrontations, but through small realisations that never get spoken out loud, a shared cup of tea, a fence mended side by side, a daughter's quiet defiance. The fashion parade, the college protests, even the jalebi shared, these aren't just moments. They're the stitches holding together the fabric of a community, a family, a society, a life.

To those who see themselves in these pages, whether in Sumi's hesitation, Sunil's hope, or Ancy's quiet strength, thank you for letting me tell this story, and to my own family, who taught me that some battles are won in silence – this is for you.

Happy Reading.

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1
The Gaze

August 2007

The air inside the Thodupuzha sub-registrar's office was thick – a suffocating mixture of phenyl, rotting paper, and the stale sweat of people waiting for ink to fix their lives. Sunil felt the pen slipping in his hand, the plastic barrel slick with his own perspiration. Beside him, Sumi was a statue, but the rhythmic, frantic twitching of her fingers against her dupatta betrayed the calm she was trying to project.

A mechanical thud echoed through the room – the official stamp hitting the register. To Sunil, it sounded like a heavy gate slamming shut. They were legally bound now, a fact recorded in black ink that seemed to bleed into the old paper. For one heartbeat, as they exchanged garlands of jasmine and marigold, the sweet fragrance offered a small, defiant shield against the chemical smell of the building.

Then a single word crossed the room.

"Mole."

Not a shout. Barely above a whisper. But it had been travelling for a long time to arrive.

Mattaikochu stood in the doorway, his weathered face wet with tears he hadn't bothered to hide. "Papa is waiting outside," he choked out.

Sumi's gaze flew to the window. In the sun-baked parking lot sat the olive-green Mahindra Scorpio. Through the dust-streaked glass, her father was motionless. Even from this distance, Sunil could see the white of Luckachen's knuckles as he gripped the steering wheel. His face was a mask of army discipline – unreadable, blank, and terrifying in its stillness.

Giri moved to the doorway, his broad shoulders blocking the couple from the car's view. Sunil stepped forward to stand beside him, shoulder to shoulder.

Through the window, Luckachen raised one hand slowly. He did not wave or curse. He pointed a single, precise finger at Giri – the gesture as steady and cold as a rifle sight.

"I will see you."

The Scorpio's engine roared to life, pulling away in a spray of gravel and hill dust. The ordinary noise of the town – the sputtering of rickshaws, the distant cries of vendors – swallowed the moment completely.

Sumi held the marriage certificate in both hands, her grip so careful it looked as though she was afraid it might shatter.

The world had cracked in two.

The calm that followed was worse than any storm.

And hanging in the air was the only question none of them could answer.

What exactly had they won?

****

THE FIGHT

2
The Beginning

June 1999

My name is Sunil, from the Ponnekuttu family, an old Syrian Catholic family from Poonjar, a town in the Kottayam district of central Kerala where the scent of rubber sheets drying in the sun smells like home and the evenings hum with the sound of private generators kicking in when the Kerala State Electricity Board fails us yet again.

I grew up in the shadow of my father's hands. Before the dawn broke, before the first bus rattled from the valley, those hands were already in motion. He had inherited four acres of rubber plantation from his grandfather, a legacy he meticulously expanded to six through agricultural loans repaid with a punctuality that bordered on prayer. That expansion wasn't bought with luck; it was carved out of decades of 4:30 mornings and the steady application of muscle memory. In the humid dark of Poonjar, guided only by the narrow arc of a headlamp, he would make his cuts with the shallow, rhythmic click of steel on bark, the latex bleeding pale into coconut shells while the rest of the village remained under blankets. He was a man defined by a specific, quiet grit, checking the weather forecast before the first steam rose from his tea, grumbling constantly about the dipping prices in the Kottayam market, yet never once missing our school fees or the new uniforms that arrived, without fail, at the start of every academic year. His hands, stained dark by dried scrap and toughened by the grip of a tapping knife, were the steady engine of our lives, harvesting the white milk of trees to ensure we had the ink to write a different future.

My mother ran the house the way the hills run rain; everything found its level eventually, but you never saw her forcing the flow. The kitchen garden was her domain, a tangle of curry leaves and green chilies in productive disorder, and rows of ginger she tended like urgent correspondence she refused to neglect. She raised the three of us with

that same unhurried attention; we never thought to ask if she was tired, because she moved as if weariness were a choice she simply hadn't made.

I am the eldest, followed by Stephen four years later, the quiet one, already serious at an age when I was still skinning knees on bark, his handwriting in the farm ledger eventually becoming neater than Father's own. Then there is Dayana, just a year my junior and, regardless of Father's illusions, the one who truly holds the architecture of this house together. She possesses a tongue that finds the exact word you'd hoped she wouldn't, and a memory precise enough to weaponize your worst moments just as you reach your greatest pride. I have never won an argument with her. I have long since stopped trying.

One of my earliest memories is from when I was about twelve. It was a rainy evening during monsoon season, and the power was out – a common enough occurrence that we barely noticed anymore. We were all sitting in the living room by candlelight, the flickering flames casting dancing shadows on the walls. Father was reading the Malayalam newspaper aloud by lamplight, market rates for rubber and spices, local political news, the usual mixture of commerce and scandal. Stephen was bent over his homework, squinting in the dim light. Dayana was doodling elaborate patterns in an old notebook.

Bored and restless, I started imitating our neighbour's rooster – loud, off-key crowing that echoed through the quiet house. Everyone laughed, even Father, which was rare enough to be memorable.

Then Dayana looked up from her notebook and said, with that particular mixture of affection and mockery she'd perfected, "Chetta, if you can make girls laugh like that, maybe one day someone will actually like you."

Mother shushed her immediately, but the teasing had begun. And in our family, once Dayana started something, it never really stopped.

****

The first week of college had felt like stepping into someone else's story – a narrative I was watching rather than living.

I stood at the edge of the college quadrangle on a Thursday evening, frozen in place, as three senior students circled a trembling first-year boy like vultures playing at mercy. The boy, barely my age, glasses slipping down his sweat-slicked nose, was being made to dance to a popular Malayalam film song, his movements jerky and humiliated while his tormentors laughed and flicked cigarette ash casually at his scuffed shoes.

The ragging wasn't violent, exactly. Just the casual cruelty that passed for tradition in many Kerala colleges. The way seniors asserted dominance over newcomers, the system perpetuating itself year after year. Most students looked away, pretending not to see. Some watched with uncomfortable expressions. A few even smirked.

My stomach twisted with shame and anger in equal measure. I should have said something. Anything. But the words stayed lodged in my throat, heavy as wet cement. This was how it worked, I'd been told by my elder cousins, “keep your head down the first few months, don't make waves, let it run its course.” Still, watching that boy's hands shake made me feel complicit.

Then she appeared.

She walked into the ragging circle like she had every right to be there. That's what struck me first, not her face, which I barely registered, but the way she moved. No hesitation. No performance. Just presence.

The seniors stopped laughing.

Felt like my stomach dropped. It wasn't attraction – not yet. It was shame. I had been standing right there, watching that boy’s hands tremble, praying only, Just don't let it be me. Just let this end. And then she had simply walked in. She did what I should have done – what I had been too terrified to do.

One senior – tall and swagger-heavy, with a thick gold chain around his neck – sneered at her intrusion. "What, dear? Want to join the fun? We can make it into a couple's dance."

She looked at him directly, her gaze level and unintimidated. Then she looked at the boy, whose shoulders were shaking. When she spoke, her voice was low and even, carrying no anger or judgment.

"He's someone's brother," she said, each word clear and deliberate. "Would you want this for yours?"

The words landed like stones thrown into still water, creating ripples of silence that spread outward through the watching crowd.

The tall senior opened his mouth to respond, then closed it. Another scratched his neck, suddenly fascinated by the ground. The third muttered something about it being time to go anyway and stepped back.

They left without another word, embarrassed more by her calm than any threat could have made them.

The boy whispered a barely audible thank you, gathered his scattered books, and disappeared toward the hostel. She adjusted her backpack, tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and walked away in the opposite direction, her dupatta trailing behind her, as if nothing extraordinary had just happened.

I watched her go, my heart hammering against my ribs. Who is she? That kind of quiet courage from a girl, of all people – I hadn't known it existed outside of movies or my grandmother's idealized stories about saints and heroes. Not loud, dramatic heroism. Just… presence. Not the loud kind of strength. The kind that doesn't need anyone to notice it.

Later, I told myself it was love at first sight. The truth was uglier; it was shame at first sight and something like hunger. The desperate need to become the kind of person who could do what she'd just done.

I turned urgently to Nobin, who had been standing beside me throughout. "Who was that?"

Nobin shrugged, already losing interest. "No idea, man. Fresher like us, maybe? Different department for sure."

"I asked about the girl," I said, perhaps too insistently.

"No idea, dear. We just joined college, today is our first day. How would I know who anyone is yet?"

For days after that morning, I looked for her everywhere.

In the canteen lines during lunch breaks, scanning faces while pretending to study the menu board. During morning assembly when all students gathered in the quadrangle, standing on tiptoe to see over taller heads. I even started lingering near the Arts and Commerce blocks between classes, though I had no business there, inventing increasingly thin excuses.

Nothing. She had vanished as completely as mist burning off in morning sun.

Different academic departments meant different class schedules, different timetables, different social orbits that rarely intersected in a campus of nearly two thousand students. I couldn't even ask around without sounding like every other college boy chasing after a pretty girl, and something about that felt fundamentally wrong. This wasn't about pursuing someone for her looks. This was about... I didn't even have adequate words for it.

Nobin noticed my distraction. One afternoon, catching me staring blankly at the Arts block entrance for the third consecutive day, he elbowed me. "You're acting possessed, da. What's gotten into you?"

I laughed it off weakly, made some joke about needing better coffee to stay awake during Professor Varghese's thermodynamics lectures. But Nobin was right. I was possessed.

I'd seen hundreds of girls at college by then. The campus wasn't exactly short on attractive, interesting women. So why couldn't I stop thinking

about this one particular girl? A girl whose name I didn't know, who had no idea I existed, who probably didn't even remember that Thursday morning, who had simply done what felt right and moved on.

Maybe that was exactly why.

The memory became a kind of companion I carried privately, pulled out and examined during boring lectures or bike rides back home. The way she stood relaxed but immovable. The steadiness in her voice. The seniors' faces when they'd realized they'd been outmanoeuvred.

I told myself repeatedly that it was stupid to build someone up in my head like this based on a three-minute encounter. She was probably already dating someone. Or not interested in relationships at all. Or maybe she'd turn out to be completely different from what I'd imagined once I actually got to know her.

But despite all the logical arguments I made to myself, I couldn't stop looking.

****

By the time Dayana was in her plus-two, her teasing about my romantic prospects had acquired a very specific target.

One Sunday afternoon, we were all gathered on the veranda after lunch, in that lazy post-meal sloth, when the June heat made any real activity seem impossible. Father was napping inside his snores audible through the open window. Mother was in the kitchen washing dishes, the familiar sound of running water and clinking steel a comforting backdrop. Dayana sat down beside me on the wooden bench, that sly grin I'd learned to be wary of playing across her face.

"Chetta," she began, with exaggerated sweetness, "you keep complaining you can't find an interesting girl in Poonjar or at your college."

I shrugged, peeling a banana from the bunch Mother had left out. "What to do? My standards are understandably high."

She laughed – that particular laugh that meant she was about to say something calculated to get under my skin. "Challenge accepted. Make Sumi fall in love with you."

"Sumi who?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"She was my senior in school, one batch ahead of me and recently joined your college in BSc Chemistry." Dayana leaned forward, eyes sparkling with mischief. "Tall, slim, this quiet kind of beauty. Always reading or studying. Doesn't waste time talking to boys much. I saw her shut down a whole group of guys at our school bus-stop, once without even raising her voice. Total badass. Completely impossible to crack."

The banana slipped from my fingers.

I saw it again with perfect clarity, the college quadrangle bathed in golden evening light, the three seniors backing away in confusion, that steady gaze that had been haunting me for weeks.

My heart stopped completely for one long moment, then restarted too fast, hammering so loudly I was certain Dayana could hear it.

That's her. The girl from the ragging incident. The one I'd been searching for like a madman, the one who'd become a touchstone in my mind – proof that courage didn't have to be loud.

She had a name now. Sumi. The ghost had just become reality.

"Why her specifically?" I managed to ask, my voice rougher than intended.

"Because you talk such a big game. If you can make someone like Sumi, someone genuinely interesting, actually notice you, then I'll admit you're not all empty words. I'll stop teasing you for life. Deal?"

My mind was racing – connecting dots, replaying that evening, the weeks of searching, the strange certainty that had kept me looking.

This wasn't coincidence. It couldn't be.

"Deal," I heard myself say, the word coming from somewhere deeper than conscious thought.

But inside, something had shifted fundamentally. This wasn't just Dayana's game anymore. It never had been.

I had been looking for Sumi, searching for her, hunting for her long before my sister gave her a name, long before this challenge made it seem like external pressure.

The universe had already chosen her for me weeks ago in that college quadrangle. Dayana had handed me the permission – and an excuse – to do what part of me had been too terrified to attempt alone.

A question lingered, though, sharper now. How had I never noticed her before that specific moment? Dayana had just described her as if she were obvious, prominent. Yet Sumi had been right there, at my college, probably crossing paths with me dozens of times. I'd seen her once — truly seen her and then she'd vanished like mist.

A smile tugged at my lips despite the nervousness coiling in my stomach. My sister had handed me a task, one I was determined to complete.

Not because I wanted to win a bet or prove Dayana wrong.

But because finding Sumi again, actually finding her, talking to her, knowing her, felt less like accepting a challenge and more like finishing something that had started the moment she'd stepped into that circle and refused to look away.

****

St. George's College announced itself with the smell of fresh whitewash and a sharp, metallic tang from the laboratories. The particular scent of an institution that took its science with a sombre seriousness. I had chosen BSc Physics less out of vocation than a kind of quiet, gravitational pull. My closest friends were heading there, seats were available, and no one in my family had drafted a more compelling map for my future. So, physics it became.

The campus possessed a modest beauty that only revealed itself through familiarity. Whitewashed buildings gathered around a central quadrangle, with the rubber plantations pressing in on three sides as if the hills were still negotiating their surrender of the land. Behind the college, the Meenachil River moved with a quiet, unbothered grace. Near the front gate stood the girls' hostel, presided over by Catholic nuns whose discipline suggested they viewed propriety not as a policy, but as a sacred obligation. We learned early that lingering near those gates without a manifest purpose was a form of spiritual trespassing.

Where we did linger, without apology, was the canteen. Jitesh Chettan and his wife, Swapna Chechi, governed the space with the easy authority of those who knew that hungry students are the most predictable creatures on earth. Situated by the riverside, it was a sanctuary of hot, jagged parippu vadas and tea so dark and syrupy it felt less like a beverage than a lifelong commitment. Within a week, that canteen became the fixed point around which the chaotic orbit of our college life finally found its centre.

I commuted daily from Poonjar, a fifteen to twenty-minute journey by motorcycle depending on traffic and whether monsoon rains had turned the roads into obstacle courses. I made the trip on my beloved Yamaha RX 100, a glossy black motorcycle that was my father's gift when I'd received my college admission letter. That bike represented freedom, independence, the daily transition between family expectations and college possibilities.

Giri was a new face in our physics batch, the only student who came up through the Plus-Two system. Nobin, Manu, Sujith, and Jomon had all been with me in pre-university education, and we had fourteen girls in our class, eight of whom we'd also known from before. But Giri was different, an outsider who somehow became an insider within days.

He was friendly in an effortless way, open and energetic, and he integrated into our existing group so smoothly that within a week we'd

forgotten he was technically new. We found ourselves admiring him, trying to keep up with his energy.

Priya was the one who made me feel slow. Not unkindly, she had no interest in making anyone feel small, but she processed things faster than the rest of us and she did not pretend otherwise. She was active in the NSS (National Service Scheme, a government volunteer program) and CSM (Catholic Students Movement), always organizing something or recruiting for some cause. Her family home was about seven kilometres from campus, but since her parents were working in the Gulf, she lived in the college hostel and visited her grandparents on weekends. From the first week, Priya fit seamlessly into our group, and her presence made everything feel lighter, more balanced.

Giri rented a small room in a house just behind campus, barely large enough for the narrow wooden cot and the small table always buried under textbooks and student union flyers. Despite the cramped quarters, he thrived there. Within a week I was watching how he entered classrooms or staff rooms, trying to understand what it was he did, that made everyone look up.

After his speech during the freshers' day welcome program, where he'd talked passionately about student rights and standing up against injustice, he'd become even more prominent. Soon after, he was leading the first organized strike St. George's College had seen in eight years. The strike wasn't just a protest – it was a turning point.

The Strike came when the administration announced exams would begin the day after the college union elections. We'd spent weeks canvassing, skipping classes, rallying students, our voices hoarse from shouting slogans along the verandas of college campus. The idea of cramming for exams overnight was absurd, especially for first-years who barely knew the syllabus.

But the real issue was the question that kept surfacing, whispered by girls during door-to-door campaigns "Do you think our parents will let us stay for elections, if exams starts the next day?"

We all knew the answer. No one would risk their grades for politics.

So we decided, if the exams wouldn't move, we wouldn't either.

The morning of the protest, we marched toward the principal's office – a hundred of us, Nobin, Jomon, Manu, and I at the front with Giri, though none of us were candidates. The air smelled of wet earth and sweat, the chant of "Students Union Zindabad!" attracted a larger crowd which eagerly joined us.

Then the door flew open. "Kaduva" – our affectionate nickname for Principal Fr. Sebastian, a man who ruled the college with a mix of stern discipline and reluctant fondness, stormed out, his cassock billowing behind him like a flag of authority. His voice, deep and resonant from years of commanding assemblies, boomed across the courtyard: "Who dares conduct a strike in my college?"

The chanting died instantly. A hundred students froze mid-slogan, the sudden silence as palpable as the tension in the air. The principal's sharp eyes scanned the crowd, his jaw set in that familiar expression we all knew too well, the one that had sent many a student scurrying to their seats during surprise inspections.

Everyone held their breath. Everyone except Giri.

He stepped forward, fist raised, and shouted: "Students Union Zindabad!" The campus erupted.

When he spoke, his voice carried the same clarity that had won over the freshers during his welcome speech: "We're not conducting a strike, Father. We're exercising our right to be heard."

The principal's eyes locked onto Giri's. For a heartbeat, the entire campus seemed to pause. Then, with a slow exhale – twenty years at St. George's sitting behind it somewhere – Fr. Sebastian's shoulders relaxed just slightly.

"Then speak, but make it quick. I have a staff meeting in ten minutes."

The crowd erupted, not in defiance, but in relief.

College administration had no choice. Exams were postponed.

After that, everything changed. Giri wasn't just a leader – he was our leader. The girls who'd barely noticed us before now smiled when we walked by. Canvassing turned into celebration, and for the first time, we weren't just students, we were a force.

But the best part? The way Giri looked at us afterward, like we'd won something bigger than ourselves. "We did it," he grinned. And in that moment, I knew: This was just the beginning.

****

One day, after I'd made my deal with Dayana about Sumi, I gathered my courage and announced my intentions to our entire friend group during our afternoon tea session at the canteen.

I gripped my tea glass until the heat stung my palms, using the pain to steady my voice. "Listen, all of you, especially you, Giri..." I forced a grin that felt tight across my face, "you can choose to pursue any girl you want, but Sumi is mine. Consider her off-limits. She's going to be your sister-in-law someday."

The declaration sounded more confident than I felt.

The table went quiet, Nobin's laughter was the first to break the silence, sharp and sceptical. "Which Sumi? There are at least five girls named Sumi in this college."

My face heated instantly. I wasn't a hero like Giri; I was the guy who stayed quiet during ragging. Claiming Sumi, the girl who had outmanoeuvred seniors, felt like claiming a star I had no right to touch.

"I don't know her full details yet. She's in BSc. Chemistry. I haven't actually met her formally. My sister Dayana told me about her."

"Wait," Jomon was grinning now "you haven't even seen this girl, and you're already claiming her? That's some confidence."

"I've decided. Sumi is mine. All of you keep your eyes off her. I'm serious."

Giri, who had been absorbed in reading the newspaper, suddenly looked up. "Wait, do you mean Sumi from Thopramkudy? Tall, usually wears her hair in a braid, carries chemistry textbooks? She stays at the girls' hostel. You should talk to Priya, they're roommates, I think."

The sudden knowledge caught me off guard. "How do you know which room Priya is in? There's something brewing between you two, isn't there?"

Manu grinned. "Yeah, Giri, how exactly do you know these hostel room details?"

I sighed with relief and actually hugged Giri impulsively. "Fine, Priya is yours. Any other girl you want, take her with my blessing. But Sumi is mine." I repeated, the words sounding hollow even to my own ears. I looked at Giri, pleading with my eyes for him to play along. I needed her to be off-limits, because I wasn't sure I could win her in a fair fight against someone as charismatic as him. "Help me out here. Introduce me to her."

Nobin smirked. "Sunil's gone all in without even seeing the girl properly. This is going to be entertaining."

Jomon laughed and slapped the table. "Okay, final decision noted: Sumi belongs to Sunil. Now, to celebrate your bold declaration, order tea and parippu vada for all of us, in Sumi's honour!"

Everyone laughed, and our conversation continued over steaming glasses of sweet tea.

The laughter of the boys faded into the sound of the Meenachil River, the bravado of the canteen replaced by the humid silence of the evening.

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The next day, during a break, Priya cornered Giri and me near our usual spot at the canteen. She leaned against the pillar, arms crossed, watching me fidget with my tea glass with an expression that was half-amusement and half-pity.

“Sunil,” she said, her voice dropping just enough to signal she wasn't joking. “You’ve been asking about Sumi.”

I felt the familiar heat rise to my face. “I – well, I was just –.”

"She knows," Priya interrupted, and the sentence I’d been building collapsed mid-air.

My heart sank. “She knows? How come?” I was in complete surprise.

“I spoke to her yesterday about Dayana and you, and even teased her that you both make a good match,” Priya explained with a smile on her face. “You also owe me a good treat for speaking very highly of you.”

"It was you who told her?”

“Not at first. Her classmates told her one ghost is haunting the Chemistry block these days, and it has to be you” Priya said, nudging me. “She’s been avoiding her usual timings so the village gossips don't send a report home to her father faster than the evening bus.”

I gripped my glass tighter. The thought of Luckachen, the man Dayana described as an immovable badass, hearing about me before I even spoke to his daughter made my stomach turn.

"She also said, and I'm quoting here, that if you want to know about her, you could just ask her directly. Apparently walking past her classroom sixteen times is not considered subtle.”

Priya leaned in, her eyes dancing with mischief. "I actually asked her if she was testing you. I told her it was brilliant but maybe a little cruel.”

I gripped my tea glass, waiting for the blow. "And?”

"She didn't even deny it," Priya laughed, enjoying my discomfort. "She just looked at me and said that if you’re serious, you'll eventually figure

it out. And if you're not..." Priya shrugged, mimicking Sumi's cool logic, "then she's saved you both a lot of wasted time."

Giri laughed, clapping my shoulder. "She's smart and wants to test you, da."

"What do I do?" I asked, the excitement now warring with a fresh, sharp fear.

"Be patient," Priya said, her tone softening as she looked towards the hostel gates. "And maybe be braver. Sumi isn't like the other girls who fall for empty words. She's got brains and standards."

****

A few weeks later, on a quiet Wednesday afternoon, Priya and Sumi were walking back from a CSM meeting. The campus was nearly empty.

As they crossed the courtyard, Priya spotted Sunil and called out.

"Sunil! This is Sumi!"

I froze. Sumi stood ten feet away, her calm eyes on me.

"Hi," I managed, my voice trembling.

She looked at me for a long moment, then smiled – a small, knowing smile. "Hi."

Her voice was warm, clear. She turned and continued walking with Priya.

I stood there, heart pounding, watching them go.

Giri clapped my shoulder. "Well, that was..."

"Terrible," I finished. "I was going to say, a start" he grinned.

****

The air inside the church smelled of melted wax and old wood. A cool sanctuary from the humid outside. St George's Church wasn't my

parish, but I'd been coming on every Friday, since high school, drawn by the special prayer of St George after Holy Mass.

As I knelt for the final blessing, I saw her, she was across the aisle, the light from the stained-glass window catching the pale blue of her dupatta. Her eyes were closed, her face stripped of the 'badass' armour she wore in the college corridors. In that stillness, she looked less a legend and more a girl carrying a weight I didn't yet understand.

I waited by the stone pillar at the entrance, my heart doing the erratic dance it always did when she was near. When she finally stepped out of church, she didn't look surprised to see me.

"You come here for Friday mass?" I asked, my voice sounding louder than I intended in the morning quiet.

She nodded, adjusting her dupatta. "Most Fridays. You?"

"Every Friday since high school."

"Can I walk with you?" I asked. "To the hostel?"

She hesitated, looking at the road where a few students were already heading toward the hostel. Then she looked back at me, a small, decisive nod. "Okay."

We walked slowly. The morning sun was beginning to bake the red earth, and the scent of rain-soaked rubber trees was heavy in the air.

"Why, physics?" she asked suddenly. "Priya said you're actually quite good at it, but you always look like you're day dreaming in the lab."

I laughed, the tension in my shoulders easing slightly. "My friends took it and seats were available. Not exactly a grand vision."

"At least you're honest," she said. "Most boys would have invented a story about wanting to be the next Raman or Kalam."

"And you? Why Chemistry?"

"I like understanding transformation. How two stable things can meet and become something entirely new, sometimes something explosive,

sometimes something beautiful. It's the only thing that makes sense in a world that wants everything to stay the same."

I looked at her, really looked at her, and the bravado I'd shown at the canteen felt miles away. "I saw you during the strike. From a distance. You looked like you were studying the crowd more than the protest."

Sumi's smile faded into something more thoughtful. "I was watching you, actually. Everyone was looking at Giri. But you were the only one looking back at the girls' wing, making sure no one got pushed on the root of things. My father taught me that real courage isn't about the one who shouts; it's about the one who stays when the shouting stops." She smiled.

We continued walking, talking about our families, our rubber plantations, Stephen's seriousness, Dayana's teasing. She told me about Thopramkudy, her father's military background, described her father as a man of discipline and her mother's worries.

"Why did you tell your friends you'd never seen me?" she asked suddenly.

My face heated. "You heard?"

"I'm sure you had seen me." Her smile widened. "Am I so terrifying?"

"No, I..."

"I've been looking for you for weeks. I think I've memorised the path to the Chemistry block better than my own labs."

Sumi smiled with quiet amusement and replied, "I know. My classmates have a running tally of how many times the 'Physics boy' walks past our door. You aren't exactly subtle, Sunil."

Rubbing the back of my neck, I said, "I didn't want to be subtle. I was afraid if I waited too long, someone else would notice what I saw that day in the quadrangle."

Her expression softened "And what did you see?"

"I saw someone who didn't care about the rules or the seniors. But mostly, I saw someone who looked... lonely. Like you were standing on a mountain peak all by yourself."

Sumi stopped walking for a second. "Everyone sees the bravery, Sunil. No one ever mentions the mountain. My father taught me to stand alone – it's the Army way. But it's a heavy way to live."

As we walked towards the hostel, a dark green Mahindra Jeep rattled past us, the engine's growl echoing off the laboratory walls. Sumi's step faltered for a second, her gaze tracking the vehicle with an intensity that sent a sudden chill through me.

"What happened?" I asked, noticing the way her hand had instinctively tightened on her bag.

She pulled herself back from whatever distance she'd travelled, a small laugh breaking the tension. "The colour... it's exactly like my father's. For a moment, I thought the High Range had come to find me." She turned to me, the 'badass' mask slipping back into place. "Don't look so pale, Sunil. I'm not going to eat you."

"You're mocking me," I said, relieved to see her smile again.

"A little," she admitted, her eyes sharpening with that playful, testing light again.

"But you still haven't answered me. Why did you tell your friends you had never seen me?"

I looked at her – her intelligent eyes, her playful expression – and chose honesty.

"If I told them I'd met you, they'd ask what we talked about. Then I'd have to say I didn't approach you. And they'd tease me endlessly. So... I said I hadn't seen you."

She laughed. "That's calculated."

“I still don’t know why I hesitated to talk to you. But when Dayana told me about you, something struck me. Like someone was saying, she is yours.”

I wanted to tell her about that day, the ragging incident, how she'd stood up for a junior when no one else would. How I'd frozen, done nothing, hated myself for it. But that cowardice had given me something unexpected: a first glimpse of her face, her courage, her fire. And I hadn't been able to forget her since.

“Priya told me about your bet with Dayana.” Sumi’s words brought me back from my thoughts.

I felt my face heat up. “I am sorry about that. It started as a joke but…”

There was a window movement at the first floor of the hostel. It was Priya looking at us.

“I don’t care about that,” She interrupted gently “I care that you have been walking past the chemistry block for three weeks just to see me.”

“Don’t be afraid of me next time. If you want to know me just ask.”

Before I could answer…

“Finally!” Priya called out, running towards them. “I was starting to think you’d never talk to each other.”

She looked as though she wanted this for us, for herself, for a hope that maybe, just maybe, things could work out the way they were supposed to.

She continued. “I’m so happy you two are talking! When I saw you from the window, you looked like lovebirds!”

“Nothing like that,” Sumi interrupted.

“I never expected you to start talking so fast! I was waiting to see how Sunil would make his next move.” Priya said, her chest light.

I grinned. “Don’t underestimate the power of a common man.”

“Don’t be so sarcastic about me, Priya,” I shot back. “You’re also in the same situation as me.”

The moment the words left my mouth, I saw Sumi’s eyes widen.

Sumi turned to Priya. “You told me it was a secret! How does Sunil know about you and Giri?”

Priya too had a surprised look on her face, staring at me.

“Priya, such things can’t be hidden,” I said gently. “Your eyes speak loud and clear. I had a doubt. Now you’ve cleared it.”

Priya looked flustered. “Nothing like that! I’m just in his friend circle. I’m waiting to see if something happens after the elections. Till then, I don’t know if he even sees me that way.”

“Giri is… complicated,” I said softly.

“Giri is a storm,” Priya corrected, her eyes fixed on the hostel gates. “And storms don't know how to sit still for a cup of tea, do they?”

Sumi reached out and squeezed Priya’s hand, a quick, silent gesture of solidarity. It was a glimpse into their life in the hostel, a bond built on shared secrets and the mutual struggle of being "moles" in a world that belonged to men.

There was vulnerability in her voice. I said quietly, “He does. He just doesn’t know how to say it yet.”

Priya looked hopeful. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Some storms are worth waiting out,” Sumi said quietly. She looked at me, then back at Priya. “But only if they have a place to come home to.”

We stood there in the morning sunlight, the world feeling smaller and bigger at the same time. Something had shifted. Something had begun.

“Well, Physics boy, you’ve had your walk. Don’t get used to it.” Priya’s playful matchmaking persona snapping back into place.

I smiled and gestured bye to Sumi.

But as they turned to leave, I saw Priya looking back towards the college building. She wasn't looking for me. She was looking for her storm.

As I walked back, I felt lighter. The challenge wasn't about winning anymore.

This was about Sumi.

And everything that was about to change.

But a few kilometres away, in the hills above Thodupuzha, something else entirely was also beginning.

In Thopramkudy, the land was speaking through the dust on cardamom leaves, the cracks in church walls, and the men who thought they owned it all.

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3
Shadows of the Hills

Thopramkudy did not merely sit upon the steep flanks of the Western Ghats; it clung to them like a half-remembered prayer. From the valley floor, the red-tiled roofs and spice-laden slopes seemed to rise out of the morning mist as if the earth itself had exhaled them into existence. Over a century ago, the first Christian settlers arrived, drawn by whispers of untamed forests that smelled of promise and damp earth. They began with the small, desperate victories of humble vegetable patches, carrots, ginger, and beans clawing through the loamy soil, before the hills finally surrendered to the heavy, dark canopy of banana groves and twisting pepper vines.

Then came the queen of spices – cardamom. Her green pods burst with aroma in the cool shade of the canopy, turning every ridge into a ledger of ambition. Now, every peak blooms with the district's bounty, clove trees perfuming the humid air, cinnamon bark curling like secrets, and ginger roots delving deep into the dark soil while turmeric stains the earth gold.

But beneath this postcard beauty, Thopramkudy simmers. Land prices spike with the arrival of tourists, and illegal stone quarries have begun to scar the hills, raw, jagged wounds carved into the ridges by men who see the land as currency to be spent rather than a legacy to be guarded.

****

The ledger was wrong by four rupees.

Not a significant sum, not against forty-two acres of pepper and cardamom, not against the Kottayam traders who moved lakhs across their desks without looking up. But Luckachen found the error at ten past nine on a Tuesday morning and did not move from his chair until he had traced it back through eleven entries to a mis-recorded weighbridge receipt from the previous Thursday.

Four rupees. Forty minutes. He was not troubled by the ratio.

He had learned in the army that small errors, left alone, became large ones. A rifle not cleaned today was a misfire tomorrow. A supply chain miscounted today was a platoon hungry next week. The discipline was not about the four rupees. It was about what happened to a man who decided four rupees did not matter.

He closed the ledger. Squared its spine with the edge of the desk. Stood.

From the veranda he could see the cardamom groves in the grey morning light, the rows he had planted himself, the ones the blasting had damaged, the new saplings he had put in last monsoon with his own hands. Forty-two acres. Every inch of it accounted for. Every harvest logged, every irrigation check recorded, every worker's wage calculated to the last paisa. His forty-two acres sat at the ridge's centre, not the largest holding in Thopramkudy, but the one other planters measured themselves against, the way a village measures itself against its oldest church.

He had built this from discharge pay and eighteen years of controlled expenditure – nothing borrowed, nothing owed. His father had left debt. Luckachen had decided, standing at his father's grave at forty-two, that debt was a form of surrender and surrender was the one thing he did not know how to do.

Below, through the kitchen window, he could hear Ancy starting the morning. The rhythm of it – steel on steel, the gas igniting, the particular sound of water filling the pressure cooker – was as familiar as parade order. He had woken to it for twenty-two years. He had never once told her that it steadied him.

He would not have known how to say it. And besides, she knew.

Down the valley, just barely visible through the morning haze, the roofline of Ittichen's farmhouse caught the first light. Luckachen looked at it the way he had once looked at enemy positions from a forward observation post – noting it, calculating it, filing it away.

He had been seventeen when he left.

The compound had been full that morning – three brothers, two labourers, his father's voice carrying across the yard with the particular authority of a man who had never once considered that the people around him might want something different from what he had decided they should want. Ouseppukochu had not been a cruel man. He had been a man of complete certainty, which was in some ways worse. Cruelty could be argued with. Certainty simply absorbed argument and continued unchanged.

The eldest son would manage the estate. The second would handle the market accounts. Luckachen, third-born, quieter than the others, the one who read when he should have been working and asked questions when he should have been listening, would take the western plot and the pepper crop and be grateful.

He had stood in the yard that morning with his small bag and his enlistment papers and he had told his father he was joining the army.

His father had looked at him the way a man looks at a ledger entry that does not balance – not with anger, but with the confusion of someone whose arithmetic has always been correct before.

"You'll come back," his father had said finally. Not a question. A correction.

Luckachen had not answered. He had walked down the hill to the bus stop and he had not looked back, not because he did not love his father, but because he knew that if he looked back, he would see the compound arranging itself around his absence already – the western plot reassigned, the pepper crop redistributed, the gap he left closing over without a mark.

He had told himself this memory no longer had weight.

He understood this now, at fifty-four, standing on his own veranda looking at his own forty-two acres, built by his own hands, owed to no

one, answering to no authority but his own ledger. He had made his name. He had done exactly what he set out to do.

What he had not examined – what he kept in the part of himself he did not often visit – was the question of what he had brought home with him from that compound besides the discipline and the calloused hands. What pattern, absorbed so early it had become invisible, he had laid down brick by brick inside his own house without knowing it was the same house he had walked away from.

Sumi had her mother's eyes, everyone said.

She had his back, his jaw, his refusal to bend.

She also had his hunger for something he could not name for her, because he had never named it for himself – only acted on it, at seventeen, with a bag and a set of enlistment papers and the sound of his father's voice growing smaller behind him on the road.

He went inside for his tea.

****

Ancy knew about the court date the way she knew about most things in this house, not because she had been told, but because she had learned to read the signs.

The folder on the side table, grown thicker these past weeks. The way Luckachen sat a little longer at his desk after dinner, writing in the margin of documents she was not invited to read. The particular set of his shoulders when he came in from the veranda – not the looseness of a man who had resolved something, but the controlled tension of a man managing something large with both hands.

She poured his tea. Black, no sugar, in the steel tumbler. She did not ask about the court date. She would not ask. In twenty-two years, she had learned that asking Luckachen about the things he was managing was the same as suggesting he could not manage them. So she poured his tea, watched him from the corner of her eye, and worried in the private part of herself that he was never allowed to see.

The cough, she thought. He thinks I haven't noticed.

She had noticed. Three weeks ago, a dry, careful sound, quickly suppressed, the sound of a man controlling something his body was trying to do without his permission. She had said nothing. He would say it was nothing, and then he would believe it was nothing because he had said it, and then she would be left with the worry and none of the information.

This was the architecture of their life together. She had not built it willingly. But she had learned to live inside it the way you learn to live inside a house that was built before you arrived, working around the load-bearing walls, finding the light where it fell.

She had married him at twenty. She had not known then what silence could weigh. She knew now. She also knew, though this had taken longer to learn, that his silence was not indifference. It was the only language he had for the things that mattered most to him. The mango grove he had planted because she had mentioned it once, newly married, in what she had thought was a passing remark. The way he stood at Sumi's bedroom door at night, just checking, just making sure – not entering, not speaking, just present.

He loves in actions, she thought. All I have ever asked is that the actions be enough.

She set his tumbler on the corner of his desk without a word. He looked up. Something passed between them – acknowledgment, or the nearest thing to it that twenty-two years had built.

She had been just twenty when her father told her about the match.

She remembered the quality of the light that afternoon, the particular yellow of late monsoon sun through the kitchen window, the smell of rice cooking, ordinary things arranged around an extraordinary sentence. Luckachen Ouseppukochu's third son. Army man. Good family. Good land. It is settled.

She had not been asked. This was not unusual. She had understood, from an age before she had words for the understanding, that the asking was not the custom, the custom was acceptance, and that acceptance performed with grace was the highest form of love a daughter could offer her parents. She had believed this. She had wanted to believe it. Wanting to believe something and believing it were close enough, at nineteen, to feel like the same thing.

What she had not been prepared for was the particular loneliness of the years that followed.

Not the loneliness of being alone, she understood that kind, the long months when Luckachen was posted far away and the house was just her and the work, and the sound of her own footsteps. She had managed that. What she had not managed, what she had never found a place to set down, was the loneliness of being present in a life that had been built around her without consulting her, of being necessary and invisible at the same time.

She had kept the house. She had kept the accounts while he was away. She had tended his parents' needs and the estate's edges and the slow, patient work of maintaining a life that would be there when he returned. She had done all of this well. She had done it without complaint because complaint required identifying what was missing, and identifying what was missing required first admitting that you had once wanted something for yourself, and that admission felt like ingratitude, and ingratitude felt like sin, and so she had folded it small and put it somewhere she did not look often.

What had she wanted? She was not entirely sure anymore. Something with her own name on it. A decision that was hers alone to make. The feeling—she had known it briefly, once, at seventeen, before the match was settled—of standing at the beginning of something whose shape she herself would determine.

Luckachen had planted the mango grove for her. She knew this. He had remembered a passing remark from the first year of their marriage – she had mentioned, almost to herself, that her mother had a mango

tree at the edge of the yard. Without a word, he had planted twelve trees on the eastern slope, and she had understood. This was his love. She had never doubted his love.

She had only ever doubted whether love, in the form he knew how to give it, was the same as being seen. Sometimes she watched Sumi – especially the set of her jaw at dinner whenever Luckachen spoke of her future as if it were already arranged. She recognized something in that jaw. Not defiance exactly. Hunger. The specific hunger of a person who has looked at the life being built around them and felt, with a precision that cannot be argued with, that it is not quite the right shape.

Go, she had wanted to say, on those evenings, across the table, in the silent language she and her daughter shared. Go and find out what shape yours should be. While you still can.

She had not said it. It would have been a betrayal of Luckachen, who was building the future with the only tools he had, with complete love, with his whole self.

But she had thought of it.

She thought of it still.

She went back to the kitchen. She had rice to sort.

****

Sumi could hear them both from her room, her father's chair shifting, her mother's quiet industry in the kitchen, and she lay still for an extra minute, listening to the particular music of the house before it knew she was awake.

This was her favourite time of day and she had never told anyone so.

At the mirror she brushed her hair in the grey morning light and looked at her own face with the calm assessment she had learned, without realising, from her father. Cheekbones, jaw, the straight line of her brow – all of it his. Her mother's eyes, her mother said. Sumi was never sure whether this was true or whether Ancy said it because

she needed it to be true, because otherwise everything of herself she had given this child had disappeared beneath the stronger current of the Thurutel blood.

She was seventeen and in a few months, she would leave for college. Her father had already identified the institution, a good college, a safe city, the right distance.

She loved her father. That was not in question. She loved the precision of him, the absolute reliability of him, the fact that he was the same man every morning of every year, that the world, which was unreliable in most things, had produced this one fixed point and put him in her life.

But she had begun to notice, quietly and with some guilt, that she also feared becoming the person his love required her to be. Not a bad person. Not an unhappy person. But a smaller one than she suspected she was.

The mirror showed her father's face.

Not entirely, her mother's eyes, yes, the shape of her mouth perhaps, but the structure underneath, the bones that would still be there at fifty and sixty and beyond, were his. The jaw, the brow, the particular quality of stillness that was not passivity but something more like controlled force. She had noticed this for the first time at sixteen and had not entirely forgiven the mirror for it since.

She did not resent her father. This was important to name clearly, even here, alone, where there was no one to perform the naming for. She loved him with a completeness that had no conditions on it. She loved the absolute certainty of him in a world that was uncertain in most things. She loved that he had built something real with his hands and defended it without apology. She loved that he was the same man every morning.

What troubled her was not him. What troubled her was the question of whether she was capable of being different.

She had watched her mother her whole life. She had watched a woman of intelligence and capability organise herself entirely around the needs of others, not unhappily, not with obvious sacrifice, but with a completeness of self-effacement that Sumi found both moving and frightening. Her mother was not a diminished person. She was a full person who had learned to take up a particular shape. The shape of a wife, a keeper, a maintainer of things.

Sumi was not sure she could hold that shape. She was not sure she wanted to find out whether she could.

Her father had left Thopramkudy at seventeen. She knew this story. He had told it once, briefly, without sentiment – the enlistment papers, the bus, the army. He had said it as proof that a man could build what he needed from nothing, that discipline and refusal were sufficient tools for any life.

He hadn't said it – and maybe he didn't even realize it – but he was telling a story about walking away from home. It was about stepping away from a future built by his family and paying the price to choose his own life.

She heard it that way regardless.

Whatever was going to happen, it would not happen here, in this room, in front of this mirror. It would happen out there, in the world that was not yet the right shape but might become so, if she was brave enough.

She was her father's daughter.

She thought she probably was.

She tied her hair and went downstairs.

Her father was at his desk. He did not look up but she felt him register her presence the way a compass registers north, automatically, without effort, without drama.

Good morning, Acha, she did not say. He was working.

She went to her mother's kitchen and stood at the doorway and they smiled at each other in the easy, wordless way of women who have shared a house long enough to have their own language.

****

Ittichen was not a cruel man.

He had thought about this carefully, over many years, and he had arrived at this conclusion with the same rigour he applied to everything else. Cruelty was personal. Cruelty required caring enough about a person to want to cause them pain. He did not care enough about anyone in Thopramkudy to be cruel to them. He was simply removing obstacles. The distinction was important.

His mother had scrubbed floors in the Luckachen compound. This was a fact. He had watched her from the gate, seven years old, watching her back bend and straighten, bend and straighten, the motion of a woman whose body had learned to apologise for taking up space. He had watched Ouseppukochu – the grandfather, the original patriarch – walk through the room she was cleaning without looking down. As if the floor cleaned itself. As if the woman on her knees were part of the architecture.

He had decided something at seven that he was only now in a position to act on.

The compound itself was gone now, split among six children, sold off, reduced to family memory. But the attitude that had produced it was still here. Still in the way certain men stood at the cooperative meetings. Still in the way certain names were spoken with automatic deference. Luckachen. Thurutel. As if the accident of a grandfather's land purchase in 1920 made a man's opinion worth more than another man's.

Ittichen had made himself impossible to ignore. He had done it the only way available to a man without inheritance, through the parallel economy, through the patience to build where others were too proud

to go, through the willingness to do what comfortable men called dirty work.

He was not ashamed of this. He was only surprised it had taken him this long.

He stood at his farmhouse window, the house built to be seen – yes, deliberately – and looked out at the eastern ridge where his machinery was working. The blasting would begin at ten. He could already calculate the dust cloud's trajectory from the wind direction.

Luckachen's cardamom groves were exactly in that trajectory.

He had not planned it this way originally. But he had not redirected it either.

Some things, he thought, arrange themselves.

He had said this once, to his eldest son, not as confession but as instruction.

"Every Thurutel and Tunkaathel in these hills is sitting on land their grandfathers cleared with axes and fire. They felled the old forest. They hunted what moved in it. They took what the earth had been holding for centuries and they turned it into estates and ledgers and family names that people now speak with respect. Nobody called them criminals. Nobody filed cases against them in Thodupuzha court. They were called settlers. Pioneers. Men of faith who brought civilisation to the wilderness."

His son had nodded, impatient. His sons were always impatient, they wanted the conclusion without the argument.

"My father," Ittichen had continued, "did not fell trees. He scrubbed the floors of the men who did. He was paid just enough to keep coming back. Just enough that leaving would have seemed ungrateful. That is the other thing they built in these hills, not just estates. A system in which certain men do the work and other men inherit the result and everyone agrees to call this the natural order."

He had paused then, watching his son's face.

"I am doing what they did. The same hills. The same timber. The same stone that was always there, waiting. The only difference is that this time the money comes to my house."

What he did not say – what he had never said aloud to anyone, not even to himself in the clearest moments before sleep – was the part that came after. That the men he was becoming were the very men he had despised. That a system built on exploitation did not become justice simply because different hands were now doing the exploiting. That his mother's bent back had not been straightened by his farmhouse on the hill. It had only been replaced by other bent backs, men from Bihar and Jharkhand who would never own this land either, who would go home with wages that kept them returning, just enough, just barely enough.

He had not built an alternative to the old order.

He had simply taken his place at the top of it.

This thought arrived sometimes, uninvited, in the quiet of early mornings. He did not entertain it long. A man who second-guessed the terms of his own survival did not survive. He had learned this before he learned anything else.

He turned from the window. The blasting would begin at ten.

There was work to do.

****

His father was already at the gate when Giri came out, checking the pepper trellis with the methodical care of a man who had no margin for error.

Giri watched him for a moment from the doorway, the thin shoulders, the careful hands, the way he moved through the small plot as if it were a larger world than it appeared. Sreedharan had raised five children on a clerk's salary and the narrow proceeds of a quarter-acre of cardamom and three cows. He had done this without complaint,

without debt, and without once suggesting to any of his children that he had sacrificed anything.

This was his father's particular gift and his particular curse. He had taught Giri that dignity required no audience. That a man's accounts were between himself and God and no one else. That good work done quietly was still good work.

Giri believed all of this. He also knew, with the restless certainty of a twenty-one-year-old, that quiet was not enough anymore. That the same structures his father had navigated with dignity were the structures that had put a man like Ittichen in a hilltop house while his father checked pepper trellises before breakfast. That dignity without power was just a way of bearing things that should not have to be borne.

He had tried to explain this once, and his father had listened in full and then said: "Be careful that your anger is in service of others and not only of itself, son."

Giri had thought about this for weeks. He had not yet decided whether his father was wise or simply tired.

Both, probably. Both at once.

He picked up his bag and went to help with the trellis. They worked in comfortable silence, father and son, in the early morning before the hills woke fully and Giri thought about the upcoming college days, about the quarry blasting that shook the valley twice a week, about the kind of world he wanted to put his own name to.

From three ridges away came the sound of Ittichen's machinery warming up, a sound the valley had learned to hear without commenting on, the way you learn not to comment on a neighbour's grief.

Soon, he thought. Something has to move.

The hills said nothing back. They never did.

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On a January evening, Luckachen stood on his veranda, watching the haze roll through the valleys. The cardamom harvest had been good and the accounts were balanced, but the air felt heavy. Sumi's departure for college was approaching and a few years from now there would be decisions to make, a suitable match, a family of standing, and a wedding to honour the life he had built for her.

Fr Mathew had asked after Sumi at Sunday Mass, gently, in the way he asked after everything that mattered to him, as though the question were merely passing conversation. Luckachen had answered briefly and changed the subject. Some things were not yet ready to be spoken aloud.

Down the valley, the lights of Ittichen's farmhouse began to glow, reminder that the engine of corruption never truly slept.

The storm was building.

He watched the mist. His back had gone rigid the way it used to before an inspection, some old instinct telling him trouble was already on its way up the hill.

The hills knew.

They always did.

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4
The Syrup of Success

August 1999

The loudspeaker outside the auditorium crackled at around 4 PM on that Saturday afternoon in the third week of August.

"General Secretary Giri."

The margin wasn't overwhelming, but it was clear. Cheers exploded from KSU corner, a sound that hit my chest like a drumbeat. Giri, my friend who had carried banners with me, who had stood between me and trouble more times than I could count, was now General Secretary. The real working post in the union. Funds, events, day-to-day decisions. The second-most powerful position in student politics.

I felt proud, not only for him, but for all of us who had slept too little and shouted too much for the last two weeks.

The first victory march was small, just our core group party workers, close friends, the ones who had believed from the beginning. Maybe thirty of us, but we made the noise of three hundred. Flags snapped in the wind, blue and white KSU banners that had been folded in backpacks all morning were now unfurled and held high. Drums appeared from somewhere, their rhythm matching my heartbeat. Nobin and Manu lifted Giri onto their shoulders. His white shirt was already wrinkled from the day, his hair dishevelled, but his face carried that rare expression, happiness mixed with responsibility and joy balanced by what he'd just taken on.

We circled the main block once, twice, our voices hoarse from chanting: "Giri! Giri! Students Union Zindabad!" The afternoon sun blazed down on us, sweat soaking through our shirts, but no one cared. This was victory, and we were going to taste every second of it. Students hung out of classroom windows, some cheering, some recording on

their phones. A few teachers stepped onto the veranda to watch, amused tolerance on their faces.

My throat was raw, but I kept shouting anyway.

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Near the commerce block, the mood shifted.

Fifteen or so SFI boys materialized from the side, a tight cluster of third year degree batches, arms crossed, faces hard. I recognized a few: Arun, their failed general secretary candidate, looking like he'd swallowed broken glass. Kishore, known for starting trouble and finishing it with fists.

The SFI boys weren't just angry. Arun was the Poonjar Panchayat president's nephew. His loss was his Uncles' loss, a loss of face in the political setup.

A water bottle arced through the air, spinning end over end. It exploded near Nobin's feet, plastic shards glinting in the sunlight.

"Rigging!" Arun spat, shoving forward. "Your KSU cheats like —"

"Fake votes!" another joined in. "We demand a recount!"

Sunil stepped between them, shoulders squared. "Look me in my eyes and say it. Stop barking at our backs."

Kishore smirked. "Or what, look at the Gumasthan (Clerk) trying to be a hero."

Sunil's fist didn't connect; he blocked Kishore's swing instead, twisting the taller boy's arm behind him. "Walk away," he said, voice low. "This isn't your fight."

For a heartbeat, the crowd held its breath. Then Arun jerked his chin, retreat. The SFI boys melted back, but not before Kishore hissed: "This isn't over, pappu."

Giri clapped Sunil's shoulder. "Where'd that come from?"

Sunil wiped his palm on his jeans. "My father taught me, stand straight, or they'll walk over you."

Giri shouted towards the retreating SFI cadres. "The counting was fair. You were there. You watched every box opened."

"Your people."

"My people did nothing but vote," Giri interrupted, his voice still calm but edged with steel. "You lost because students chose differently. That's democracy. Accept it."

Arun's face flushed red, but he had no answer. Kishore started to say something, but Arun put a hand on his shoulder. A moment stretched tense, fragile. Then Arun stepped back shouting at Giri. 'Your KSU friends won't save you when the Panchayat hears about this.'" Others followed his lead, muttering threats that dissolved into nothing as they melted away into the crowd.

Around me, I felt the tension drain from our group, shoulders relaxing, fists unclenching. Giri looked down at me and gave the smallest nod. We both knew: this wasn't over. Just paused. But for now, we'd avoided disaster.

My knuckles ached where I'd blocked Kishore's swing. A small price. Giri clapped my shoulder. "That's how you lead, Sunil. Not with fists. With this," he said, tapping his temple.

The march continued, drums resuming their beat, voices rising again. But I kept glancing back over my shoulder, watching the commerce block where the SFI boys had retreated. They were talking in tight circles, anger still visible in their postures.

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The march ended near the canteen as the sun began its descent toward the western hills. Boxes appeared, jalebi, cupcake, banana chips, ladoos, contributed by supporters, bought with pooled money and offered as a celebration. We ate standing up, laughing about the morning's chaos, the way the returning officer's hands had trembled

during the count, the moment the announcement crackled through the speakers.

The sweetness of jalebi mixed with exhaustion and relief. Jitesh Chettan brought out extra tea. "On the house, for the new General Secretary!" and Swapna Chechi teased Giri about managing the college now. The canteen smelled of hot oil and cardamom, voices overlapping, the late afternoon light turning everything golden.

Then all of a sudden Manu said, "Hostel next."

The suggestion rippled through the group. Of course. The girls who had voted, who had stood with us during canvassing, who had argued with their wardens for permission to attend rallies. They deserved thanks too.

We grabbed the remaining boxes and walked toward the girls' hostel. About twenty of us, flags still waving, energy still high despite the long day. The hostel stood near the front gate, a three-story building with narrow windows and a severe metal gate that was always locked by 7 PM. Nuns ran the place with rules stricter than any army barracks: no male visitors beyond the gate, no noise after 9 PM, no exceptions.

Sr Glory was waiting at the gate, arms folded across her chest, expression stern as carved stone. She was in her fifties, tall and thin, with eyes that missed nothing. We'd all heard stories about her catching couples behind the library, her lectures on propriety that could make grown men apologize for breathing.

"No entry," she said before anyone could speak.

Giri stepped forward, hands joined in respectful namaste. "Sister, just five minutes. We've brought sweets for the girls who voted and also for the hostel staff. A thankyou only. No disturbance."

She studied him, his earnest face, the slight bow in his posture, the way he kept a respectful distance from the gate. Her gaze flicked to the boxes held by Nobin and Manu. Then to the crowd behind us, for once waiting quietly, sensing this required delicacy.

Something in her expression shifted, not quite softening, but maybe acknowledging the occasion. She'd been here long enough to see election results come and go, to know that today was different from tomorrow, that some moments required flexibility.

"Five minutes," she said finally, her voice allowing no negotiation. "No noise and no boys inside the gate. You stay here. They come to the veranda."

Relief washed through the group. "Thank you, Sr Glory," Giri said, bowing again.

She turned to the hostel. "Girls! Visitors!" Then she stepped aside, still standing guard like a sentinel, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

The response was immediate. Doors opened. Girls spilled onto the first-floor veranda and down the stairs, laughing, pushing each other forward, hair still wet from evening baths, some in casual salwars, others in hostel night clothes with dupattas thrown hastily over shoulders. The air filled with excited chatter, the kind of energy that comes when routine breaks and something unexpected happens.

Sr Glory's presence kept things orderly. The girls formed a loose crowd on the veranda and front steps, staying just inside the gate boundary. We stood outside, passing boxes over the metal bars.

"Jalebi for everyone!"

"Cakes here!"

"Ladoos — who wants ladoos?"

Hands reached through the gate, boxes passed from boy to girl, sweets distributed with laughter and shouted thanks. The chaos was controlled, joyful. Girls called out to friends in our group "Good work!" "Giri will be great!" and we called back, thanking them for their votes, promising better events next semester.

I stayed near the back, holding a small box I'd kept aside. My heart hammered so hard I thought everyone could hear it. The celebration

noise, the crowd, the laughter, it all felt distant, muffled, as if I were underwater.

Then she appeared.

Sumi stepped onto the veranda, not rushing like the others, moving with that careful grace she always had. She wore a light blue salwar, simple, no embroidery, quietly elegant. Next to it, everyone else in the room looked overdressed. Her hair was tied back loosely, a few strands escaping near her face. The late afternoon sun, filtering through the trees, caught in those strands and turned them copper.

Our eyes met across the crowd. Everything else blurred, the voices, the laughter, the boxes passing hand to hand. Just her and me and the space between us that felt like miles and inches at the same time.

I stepped forward, legs feeling heavier than they should, and pushed through the crowd toward the gate. No one noticed. Everyone was focused on the sweets, on Sr Glory monitoring the time, on the sheer novelty of boys and girls talking across the hostel boundary without getting scolded.

"For you," I said when I reached her, my voice quieter than I meant. I held the box through the bars of the gate.

She looked at it, then at me. For a second, I thought she might not take it. That she'd say something polite and distant, maintaining the careful space she kept between us in public. My hand stayed extended, the box trembling slightly, from my pulse or nerves, I couldn't tell.

The jalebi box was sticky with syrup, still warm. When Sumi took it, her fingers lingered on mine for three heartbeats – long enough for the crowd's noise to fade, long enough for me to see the pulse in her throat.

"You're trembling," she murmured.

"So are you."

Her smile was private, just for me. "Then we're even."

In that moment, with the gate between us and a hundred people around us and Sr Glory's watchful eyes somewhere nearby, it felt like we were the only two people in the world.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"You're welcome," I managed.

No one else noticed. The crowd was too thick, too focused on their own conversations. Except Priya, standing a few steps behind Sumi, watching with that knowing smile she always wore when she saw something before anyone else did.

She caught my eye and gave the smallest nod, like a blessing or encouragement.

She held the box carefully, like it contained something precious rather than just sweets. Then someone called her name – one of her roommates – and the moment broke. She stepped back into the crowd of girls. But just before she turned away, she looked at me one more time. That same small smile. A promise that this wasn't the end, just a pause.

Sr Glory clapped her hands sharply. "Time!"

The five minutes were up. The girls retreated, still laughing, clutching their boxes, calling out final thanks. Doors closed. The hostel returned to its usual quiet, as if the last few minutes had been a dream.

We left, flags furled now, energy beginning to flag. But as we walked back towards the main campus, all I could think about was that small box in Sumi's hands, and the way her fingers felt against mine for that single, perfect second.

Later on, in a small chat with Priya about the hostel celebration visit, she had a deliberate 'I saw everything' smile on her face and told me: "That's how you win her, Sunil. Not with words. With such gestures."

****

The march continued into town, growing as we went. Students from other departments joined, then town youth who'd heard about the victory, then party workers from surrounding areas who'd been waiting for this moment. By the time we reached Erattupetta's main road, we numbered close to a hundred.

The procession wound through the narrow streets, past the bus stand where evening commuters paused to watch, past the medical shop where the owner stepped out and clapped, past the bakery that sent out a boy with a tray of coconut buns. Crackers burst sporadically, sharp sounds that made stray dogs bark and children run alongside us. The evening air smelled of smoke and sugar and sweat.

We reached the party office near the market just as the streetlights flickered on. It was a modest building — two rooms on the ground floor of an old commercial complex, walls plastered with faded posters of past victories and party symbols. But today it felt like the centre of the world.

Tea appeared in endless glasses. Snacks flowed — parippu vada, samosas, banana fritters still hot from nearby shops. The office filled beyond capacity, spilling onto the street, onto the stairs leading to upper floors. Voices overlapped, everyone talking at once, reliving the campaign, the counting, the narrow moments when we'd thought we might lose.

Giri stood in the centre, still on someone's shoulders, thanking people by name. He had this gift — remembering who had carried which banner, who had convinced which wavering voter, who had stood in the rain distributing pamphlets. Each person he thanked glowed a little brighter, stood a little taller.

The celebration went late. By 9 PM, my voice was gone, my legs ached, and I was running on adrenaline and sweet tea. Giri finally climbed down, shook the last few hands, and made his way to where I was leaning against my Yamaha RX 100.

"Ready?" he asked, his own voice hoarse.

I nodded. We made our excuses, promising to be back tomorrow for the planning meeting. The night had turned cool, mist creeping down from the hills. We rode through the dark, winding roads, my headlight cutting narrow paths through the fog. Neither of us spoke, but it was a comfortable silence — the kind you only have with someone who's been through battle with you.

We reached Poonjar just after 10 PM. Dayana was sitting on the veranda, textbook open on her lap, but her eyes were on the road. The moment she saw us, she jumped up.

"So?" she asked before we'd even turned off the bike.

"General Secretary," Giri said, swinging off the pillion.

Dayana clapped, the sound sharp in the quiet night. "I told you! I told everyone!" She grabbed Giri's hand and pulled him toward the house. "Come, come. Mom's kept food."

Inside, the house smelled of fresh pazham pori and tea brewing on the stove. Mother emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her cloth, smiling that warm smile she reserved for sons and honoured guests. Father looked up from his Bible, nodded approval — his highest form of praise.

We sat at the dining table. Mother brought out tea and pazham pori, the banana fritters still warm, sugar coating our fingers. Dayana perched on the chair arm, too excited to sit properly.

"Tell everything," she demanded. "Start from the counting."

So, we did, Giri mostly, me adding details he forgot. The tension during counting, the SFI boys' complaints, the recount that changed nothing, the final announcement. Dayana listened, eyes wide, interrupting with questions.

Then she turned to me, eyes narrowing with that particular mischief that meant trouble.

"And Sumi?" she asked. "Any progress? Or is my brother still dreaming from a distance?"

I felt my face heat up. "Dayana..."

Giri glanced at me, then back at her. "He's working on it," he said carefully. "Step by step."

Dayana wasn't satisfied. "Step by step? That's politician talk. You're hiding something."

"I'm a young politician now," Giri said, grinning despite his exhaustion. "Hiding is part of the job."

Mother called from the kitchen. "Eat properly. Stop interrogating."

We ate, the conversation moving to safer topics — the upcoming festival, the fashion parade planning, who would be chief guest. But Dayana kept glancing at me, a small smile on her face, like she knew something I hadn't told her. I was grateful she didn't push further that night. My mind was still back at the hostel gate, replaying the moment Sumi's fingers brushed mine, the small smile she gave me when no one else was looking.

After Giri left for his rented room around midnight, I lay in bed, too wired to sleep despite the exhaustion. Through my window, I could see stars scattered across the clear sky — nothing like the mist-shrouded skies of nearby hilly areas or Thopramkudy. But my mind was there anyway, wondering if Sumi was still awake, if she'd opened the box, if she was thinking about that moment at the gate the way I was.

****

Monday morning arrived too soon and not soon enough.

College reopened at 9 AM, but the full victory celebration march didn't begin until 9:10 — just before first period, timed perfectly to catch everyone before they scattered to classes.

The union team assembled at the main block: Chairman, Giri, Arts Club Secretary, Councillors, Magazine Editor, Class and Lady representatives and about forty supporters. This wasn't the intimate march of Saturday. This was official, sanctioned by the college, a

tradition that followed every election. Even the teachers expected it, had mentally written off the first half-hour of classes.

We started from the main block veranda and moved systematically. Physics first, then Chemistry, then Botany, Commerce, and Zoology, hitting every department, every classroom in sequence. The progression was carefully planned: leave no one out, thank everyone, make every student feel they'd been part of the victory whether they'd voted for us or not.

At each door, we paused. Someone from the union, usually Giri or the Chairman, would knock politely, wait for the teacher's nod, then step inside. The rest of us would crowd the doorway, filling the corridor, drums ready.

"Good morning, sir. Good morning, students. Thank you for participating in our democratic process. Your votes matter. Here's a small token of our gratitude."

Then the chanting would start: "Giri! Giri! Students Union Zindabad!" "Thank you, voters! Thank you, students!" The drums would kick in, making the walls vibrate. Boxes of sweets would be passed directly into students' hands — jalebi, ladoos, cakes. Not handed to one of the students to distribute. Given person to person, with eye contact and a smile each time.

In the first year Physics classroom, a girl in the front row, I think her name was Anjana, blushed bright red when Giri handed her a sweet and thanked her by name. She'd been one of the most active campaigners, had convinced her entire hostel floor to vote for KSU.

The teacher, Mr. Thomas, who usually looked ready to scold at the slightest provocation, smiled indulgently and let the interruption continue for a full minute before gently shooing us out.

In the Chemistry block, girls crowded the door before we even reached it, phones already out, recording everything. The teacher in the back row, a young lecturer who'd only joined last semester clapped along with the slogans, pretending to be annoyed but failing completely.

One student shouted, "Next year, better lab equipment!" and Giri, without missing a beat, replied, "Put it in writing. We'll fight for it." The classroom erupted in cheers.

In every room, we paused for short speeches — thanks to everyone who voted, promises of better canteen food, more cultural events, transparent fund management. Giri had this way of speaking that made even the SFI voters nod along, acknowledging that while they might not have chosen him, at least he was sincere.

By the time we'd covered the science blocks, word had spread. Students were waiting in corridors, leaning out of windows, wanting their share of the celebration. The arts block was even more enthusiastic. Literature and History students who'd written slogans for our posters, designed our banners, stayed up late photocopying pamphlets.

We reached the final classroom, third-year Botany at 11:00 AM. The teacher there, an elderly professor named Dr. Mathew who'd been at the college longer than most of us had been alive, stopped his lecture mid-sentence.

"This is the problem with student politics," he said, but his eyes were twinkling. "No respect for Botany. You save us for last."

"No sir," Giri replied quickly. "We saved the best for last. The seniors who guide us."

Dr. Mathew snorted, but he accepted his sweet and let us do our chanting. As we turned to leave, he called out: "Mr. Giri. I expect responsible leadership. No strikes unless absolutely necessary."

"Yes, sir," Giri said seriously. "You have my word."

The march officially ended, but the atmosphere lingered. Classes resumed, but half-heartedly. Teachers gave up on serious lectures, settling for casual discussions or letting students work on assignments. Everyone's pockets bulged with sweets. The canteen was packed during

the break, everyone rehashing their favourite moments, already planning the post-Onam festival.

The loose schedule gave us time — time that had been compressed into stolen moments before, now suddenly abundant. Post-election days were always like this: a brief window where the machinery of routine paused before grinding back to full speed.

Exams were after Onam holidays.

For now, we could breathe.

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That night, I lay in bed, the taste of jalebi still on my tongue — sweet, but already turning heavy in my stomach. The victory march, the cheers, the way Sumi's fingers had brushed mine, it all felt like a dream now, one that wouldn't survive what came next.

Some celebrations aren't endings. They're just the last quiet moment before the world reminds you it doesn't stop for anyone.

I didn't know it then, that a few kilometres away, a storm was gathering in the hills — one that would change everything.

The syrup on my fingers wasn't just sugar. It was the last thing that would feel simple before everything got complicated.

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5
The Storm before Onam

September 1999

The canteen steps were empty when I found her.

It was only three days since the victory march, but the campus already felt different — as if the air had been let out of a balloon. Most of the day scholars had left for Onam, and the hostel girls were packing, their voices carrying the sharp edge of homesickness. Sumi stood apart from it all, her book unread in her hands, her gaze somewhere beyond the rubber trees.

I hesitated. Not because I was afraid to talk to her, but because I knew this was the last quiet moment we'd have before everything got louder.

"Tea?" I asked, walking up before my courage could fail.

She looked at me, surprised, then nodded. "Okay."

We walked to the canteen together, not side by side like couples did, but with that careful space between us that said we were just classmates, nothing more. But Jitesh Chettan knew better. The moment we sat at the corner table under the banyan tree, he brought two glasses of hot tea and parippu vada without us having to order.

"On the house," he said with a knowing smile. "For the General Secretary's friend and his special guest."

Sumi's cheeks coloured slightly, but she didn't protest. We sat across from each other, the worn wooden table between us, the canteen's tin roof providing shade from the afternoon sun.

For the first time since that Friday morning walk to the hostel months ago, we talked without pressure. No friends hovering nearby, no schedule to rush to, no fear of being interrupted. Just tea and conversation and the lazy afternoon heat.

Steam rose from the glasses, curling between us in slow spirals. I watched her fingers trace the rim of her glass when she was thinking — a small habit I hadn't noticed before. Her nails were short, practical, no polish. A thin white scar ran across her thumb, barely visible.

"How did you get that?" I asked, nodding at her hand.

She glanced down. "Kitchen knife. I was seven. Tried to cut a mango by myself. Amma said I was too impatient to wait for help."

"Are you still?"

She smiled. "Impatient? Sometimes. But I've learned to wait when it matters."

The words hung between us, weighted with meaning neither of us acknowledged directly.

"You won," she said, changing the subject.

"Giri won," I corrected. "We helped."

"You carried banners and canvassed effectively," she said, echoing Dayana's teasing from the other night.

"Among other things." I looked at her, feeling braver in the quiet intimacy of this moment. "I carried one with your name on it. In my head."

Her cheeks warmed, the colour spreading down her neck. She looked down at her tea, but I could see the smile she was trying to hide.

"You're getting better at this," she said softly.

"At what?"

"Talking to me. You used to look like you might faint."

I laughed, embarrassed. "I still feel like I might. I'm just better at hiding it."

She looked up then, her eyes meeting mine directly. "Don't hide it. I like knowing I make you nervous. It means I'm not alone in feeling this way."

My heart stuttered. This was the most direct she'd ever been, the closest to naming what was growing between us. I wanted to reach across the table, take her hand, tell her everything I'd been thinking about for months. But we were still in public, still visible, still bound by the invisible rules that governed every interaction.

"Tell me about Thopramkudy," I said instead. "You've been going home every weekend, right?"

Her expression shifted, some of the openness closing off. "Most weekends. This week I didn't — too tired after the elections. But normally, yes."

"What's it like?"

She thought for a moment, her fingers still tracing the glass rim. "Beautiful. Quiet. Suffocating."

The last word came out softer, almost a whisper. I waited, not pushing.

"The mist in the mornings," she continued, "the cardamom plants, the way the hills look when the sun sets. I love all of that. But..."

"But?"

"But everyone watches everything. Amma asks a hundred questions before I even finish taking off my shoes. 'Who did you sit with on the bus? Who called you last week? Why is your phone always busy?' Papa doesn't say much, but he observes. He looks at me like he's reading a report, noting every small change."

"Do they know? About us?"

She shook her head quickly. "No. There's no 'us' to know about yet, is there? We're just... talking."

The way she said it, halfway between question and statement, made my chest tighten.

"What if there was?" I asked. "What if this became something real?"

She was quiet for a long time, looking at her tea. When she finally spoke, her voice was careful, measured.

"My father has plans for me. A good match, he says. Someone from a family he respects, with land, with standing. Someone from Thopramkudy or nearby, so I'll stay close to home."

"And what do you want?"

She looked up at me then, her eyes holding mine with an intensity that made it hard to breathe.

"I want to choose. I want to study, to work, to live somewhere I can breathe without every neighbour reporting back to my mother. I want..." she paused, "I want to be with someone who sees me, not just my father's daughter or a good match or a dowry."

"I see you," I said quietly.

"I know," she replied. "That's why I'm here."

We fell into silence then, but it wasn't awkward. It was the kind of silence that happens when everything important has already been said, more words would only dilute it. I watched her sip her tea, the way the sunlight filtered through the banyan leaves and dappled her face, the small smile that played at the corners of her mouth.

When the glasses were empty, neither of us moved to leave.

"I like this," she said softly. "Just talking. No crowd around us, no performance."

"Me too."

"Can we do it again?"

"As often as you want," I said.

She smiled — that real smile, the one I was starting to collect like treasures. "After Onam, then. When college reopens."

"A promise," I said, then immediately felt foolish. Too forward, too presumptuous.

But she didn't correct me. She just gathered her books, stood up, and looked at me one more time.

"A Promise, then," she agreed. Then she walked away, leaving me sitting there with two empty glasses and a heart so full it hurt.

****

Later that week, during one of the festival planning meetings, the conversation turned serious. About fifteen of us crowded into the union office — a small room behind the main auditorium, filled with old furniture and filing cabinets stuffed with yellowing records of past events.

Giri sat at the desk, notepad open, pen in hand. The rest of us occupied chairs, windowsills, whatever space we could find. Priya sat near the window, cross-legged on the floor, her chunni spread around her like a skirt. She'd been quiet during most of the meeting, which was unusual for her.

"Fashion parade needs participants," Giri said, scanning his list. "We have eight solo entries so far — six girls, two boys. But we need couples too. Makes it more interesting."

Manu grinned. "Sunil and Sumi should walk together."

I felt every eye in the room turn to me. My face heated up immediately.

"I don't know if she'll — "

"Ask her," Priya said suddenly, her voice cutting through my stammering. "She'll say yes."

"How do you know?" I asked.

She gave me that look she always had — the one that said she saw ten steps ahead of everyone else. "Because I'm her roommate. And because I know her better than you think."

The group erupted in laughter and teasing. Someone started chanting "Sunil-Sumi! Sunil-Sumi!" until Giri raised his hand for quiet.

"Seriously though," he said, looking at me. "Would you do it? The fashion parade is the centrepiece of the festival. Traditional dress, just a short walk on stage with music. It's not complicated."

I thought about it — the idea of walking across a stage with Sumi, everyone watching, officially together even if just for three minutes. The thought terrified and thrilled me and I couldn't have told which one was winning.

"I'll do it," I said. "If she agrees."

"Leave that to me," Priya said with a smile.

The meeting continued, covering other topics: chief guest selection (still being debated), sports day events, food fest logistics. But my mind kept wandering to the fashion parade, to the image of Sumi in traditional dress, to the possibility of standing beside her in front of the entire college.

After the meeting dispersed, I caught up with Giri and Priya as they walked toward the canteen.

"You really think she'll say yes?" I asked Priya.

She stopped, turned to look at me with that assessing gaze. "Sunil, she will be terrified. Not of you, but of what this means. Walking on stage together. That's public. That's real. That's something her village might hear about. But..."

"But?"

"But I also think she's ready. Or at least, she wants to be ready. Sometimes people need a little push to take the step they've been wanting to take all along."

Giri nodded. "Give her time. Let Priya talk to her. If she says no, we'll find some other way. No pressure."

But I knew there wouldn't be anyone else. Not for me.

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That evening, after the last class, Sumi and Priya walked back to the hostel together. The campus was quieter now, most day scholars having left, only hostel students and a few stragglers remaining. The evening air carried the smell of frying from the canteen and the distant sound of someone practicing tabla in the music room.

Priya had been silent most of the walk, which Sumi had learned meant she was building up to something important.

"So," Priya finally said as they approached the hostel gate. "Fashion parade."

Sumi sighed. "I knew you'd bring it up."

"Giri asked if you'd participate. With Sunil. As a couple."

Sumi stopped walking. "Priya..."

"I know. I know it's scary. I know walking on stage together means everyone will see, everyone will know. I know it might reach Thopramkudy, might reach your parents."

"Then why are you even asking?"

Priya turned to face her, expression serious. "Because I also know you want to say yes. I see the way you look at him, Sumi. The way you smiled when he gave you those sweets at the hostel gate. You're already in this. The only question is whether you're going to hide it forever or take one step forward."

Sumi looked away, toward the hills in the distance where Thopramkudy lay hidden in mist. "It's not that simple."

"It never is. But it's also not as complicated as you're making it." Priya's voice softened. "You have months before this happens. After Onam holidays, after exams, during festival week. That's October. You have time to prepare, time to think. But Sumi... at some point, you have to decide. Is this real or are you just playing at it?"

"I'm not playing," Sumi said quietly, hurt in her voice.

"Then prove it. Not to me, not to anyone else. Prove it to yourself."

They walked the rest of the way in silence. At the hostel steps, Sumi paused.

"I'll think about it," she said.

Priya smiled. "That's all I'm asking."

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Priya told me later what happened that evening in their room. I've replayed it so many times it feels like I was there.

Inside their room, after evening prayers and dinner, the conversation turned more personal. They sat cross-legged on their respective beds, the small room lit by a single fluorescent tube that hummed softly. Through the window, they could hear other girls laughing in distant rooms, someone singing along to a radio.

Priya spoke first, her voice softer than usual. "Can I tell you something?"

"Always," Sumi said.

"I'm tired of waiting." Priya pulled her knees to her chest, resting her chin on them. "I watch Giri every day. I see him notice me. I know he does. The way he makes sure I'm included in every meeting, the way he listens when I speak, even that small smile he gives me when he thinks no one's watching. He knows how I feel. I'm sure of it."

"Then why doesn't he — "

"I don't know," Priya interrupted, frustration creeping into her voice. "Maybe he's focused on his new position. Maybe he thinks it'll complicate things. Maybe he's just... scared." She looked at Sumi. "Do you ever wonder if you're making a mistake? Letting yourself care this much?"

Sumi was quiet, thinking about the question. "Every day," she finally admitted. "Every time I go home and Amma asks who I was sitting with on the bus, or Papa looks at me like he's trying to read what I'm

not telling him. Every time I think about the future, he's planning for me — some boy from a good family, a proper wedding with all of Thopramkudy watching. Yes, I wonder if I'm being foolish."

"But?"

"But then Sunil does something small. Brings me tea without asking, or remembers something I mentioned weeks ago, or looks at me like... like I'm the only person in the room. And I think, this is real. This is worth the fear."

"Even with your parents? Your father?"

Sumi's expression tightened. "That's the part that terrifies me. Not Sunil, not what I feel. But the day I have to face Papa and tell him I've chosen differently than he planned. That I want something he might not approve of."

“I don't even know how he would react. Sometimes I think, even if he's not expressive, he would stand with me in the end. Even if Amma didn't.” Sumi continued.

Priya reached across the gap between their beds, taking Sumi's hand. "We're both scared. Just in different ways."

Sumi squeezed back. "At least we have each other."

They sat like that for a while, hands clasped across the narrow space, each lost in their own thoughts about the men they were slowly, carefully, terrifyingly learning to love.

Finally, Priya spoke again. "The fashion parade. Are you really going to say no?"

Sumi smiled despite herself. "I didn't say no. I said I'd think about it."

"That's politician talk. You're learning from Giri."

"Maybe I am." Sumi pulled her hand back, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I'm scared, Priya. Not of walking on stage, but of what it means. Once we do that, there's no taking it back. Everyone will see. People

from my village study here, they'll tell their parents, who'll tell mine. It'll reach Thopramkudy faster than I can get there myself."

"And?"

"And I don't know if I'm ready for that conversation yet. With my parents. With my father."

Priya nodded slowly. "I understand. But Sumi... you can't hide forever. At some point, you have to choose — living the life your parents planned, or taking a risk on what you want."

"I know," Sumi whispered. "I just need time."

"Then take it. But don't wait so long that you wake up one day and realize you let fear make all your decisions."

The words settled between them, heavy with truth. Outside, the hostel bell rang for lights-out in fifteen minutes. They could hear footsteps in the corridor, girls rushing to finish washing up, calls of goodnight echoing through the building.

"Priya?" Sumi said as they both got up to change for bed.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you. For pushing me. For seeing what I'm too scared to admit."

Priya smiled. "That's what friends do. We see each other clearly, even when we can't see ourselves."

They changed in comfortable silence, turned off the light, and settled into their beds. But both lay awake long after, staring at the dark ceiling, thinking about courage and fear and the men who made them feel both at once.

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The week passed in a blur of classes and planning meetings. The fashion parade discussion was tabled. Priya had reported that Sumi was "considering it," which everyone understood meant "not yet." Other participants were recruited, costumes discussed, music selected.

Then came the announcement that changed everything: Onam holidays would begin Friday. One week off. Then exams would start the Monday after we returned — crucial exams for our future.

The campus emptied rapidly. Day scholars left immediately after Thursday's last class. Hostel students packed Friday morning, the veranda crowded with bags and excited chatter about going home. Buses and jeeps filled up, drivers shouting destinations — "Kottayam! Pala! Thodupuzha! Changanassery!"

I saw Sumi in the crowd, a small bag slung over her shoulder. She was with a group of Thopramkudy girls heading to the bus stand. Our eyes met briefly. She gave a small wave — casual enough that no one watching would think twice. But I saw the message in it: one week at home, under her parents' watchful eyes, back to being the dutiful daughter who edited every word and guarded every smile.

I waved back, trying to pour everything I wanted to say into that simple gesture.

Then she was gone, swallowed by the crowd, heading home to a world I'd never seen but increasingly knew would define our future.

Giri and I rode back to Poonjar together that afternoon. The roads were packed with holiday traffic — buses overcrowded, bikes weaving through cars, everyone rushing to get home for Onam. We didn't talk much during the ride, both lost in our own thoughts.

At my house, Mother was already preparing for the festival — fresh banana leaves ordered, vegetables being chopped for the sadhya, the smell of payasam already filling the kitchen. Dayana was home from her tuition classes, helping with decorations, teasing me the moment I walked in.

"Back from college? or back from dreaming about Sumi?"

I ignored her, but she followed me to my room.

"So? Fashion parade? Is she doing it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "She's thinking about it."

"That means no."

"That means she needs time."

Dayana sat on my bed, expression turning more serious. "Chetta, does she know what she wants? Because if she keeps waiting, if she keeps being scared, someone else will make decisions for her."

"I know," I said quietly. "But I can't push her. This has to be her choice."

"Just don't wait so long that there's no choice left to make."

Her words echoed what Priya had said to Sumi, what I'd been thinking myself but hadn't wanted to acknowledge. Time wasn't infinite. Decisions delayed were still decisions made — just made by default, by fear, by letting circumstances choose instead of choosing for ourselves.

That night, as the house settled into a heavy quiet, my thoughts drifted to Thopramkudy. Was Sumi lying awake too, or was she already folded back into the normalcy of family and Onam preparations — a life that had no room for a boy from Poonjar with more dreams than land?

The mechanical trill of the landline in the dining hall startled the silence. It chimed twice, then died. I was out of bed before I could think, my bare feet silent on the floor. I stood over the receiver, chest heaving, watching it in the dark. It wailed again — three sharp, rhythmic tolls. I reached out, my fingers inches from the cold plastic, but the line went dead. The hollow hum of the dial tone that followed felt like a door slamming shut; my hope of hearing even a fragment of her voice was gone.

A slow, private smile crept across my face despite the ache. It was the signal. Two missed calls — the code we'd whispered to each other, a secret language to say she was home without alerting her parents.

The relief was a warm hum in my chest, but as I looked out at the ink-black wilderness of the night, the smile faded. The coming holidays felt like a mountain between us. In these weeks, that phone wouldn't be a bridge; it would be a gatekeeper. The logistical nightmare of

catching her alone, away from prying ears, made the distance feel suddenly, heavily immense.

That night, while I lay in bed still tasting the afternoon's sweetness, the hills were doing what the hills do – keeping their own counsel about what moved in the dark below them.

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A few kilometres away in Thopramkudy, late that same night.

The frantic call of "Ichaayaaa" from Mattaikochu awakened Luckachen just after midnight. Mattaikochu's voice was shaken, stripped of its usual steady calm.

"Ichaaya... a worker from the lower farm... found dead...." and he continued saying something, his breath ragged from the rush uphill, the words continued spilling out too faintly to be understood.

Luckachen stood in the darkness of his veranda, looking at Mattaikochu running towards him shouting...

The mist outside was thick, obscuring everything beyond the cardamom fields. But he could feel the hills watching, waiting.

"How?" he asked, his voice flat, controlled.

Mattaikochu leaned in close to Luckachen, his words barely a thread of sound. He spoke with a cautious economy, keeping his voice tethered low, acutely aware that Ancy and Sumi were just beyond the door. Every detail was shared in that heavy whisper, ensuring the truth stayed between the two men, shielded from the ears of the women inside.

Luckachen's jaw tightened. He looked toward the ridge where, on clearer nights, you could see Ittichen's farmhouse lights burning.

Mattaikochu didn't need to say it. The Panchayat secretary's son was involved in Ittichen's illegal quarry running. The files would vanish by morning.

Tonight, the mist hid everything. But Luckachen knew what this was.

Luckachen stood for a moment looking into the mist. Inside, he could hear Ancy moving in the bedroom, probably woken by the voice. Sumi's room was dark, she'd arrived home this afternoon, exhausted from travel, had gone to bed early with mumbled answers to Ancy's questions.

Let her sleep, he thought. Let her have one more night before this darkness touches her world too.

The storm he'd been watching build for years had finally begun.

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6
The Body in the Mist

September 1999

Luckachen was sitting on the veranda long after dinner, as he often did. The house behind him was dark and still. Ancy asleep in their room, Sumi in hers, exhausted from the bus journey home and the flurry of her mother's questions. The air was cool, heavy with the scent of wet earth and cardamom, the mist drifting in slow curtains from the higher hills. Most nights, this was his time to think: about the day's yields, the market prices, the small shifts in the workers' moods. Or simply to listen to the hills settle — the occasional rustle of leaves, the distant call of a night bird.

Tonight, though, his mind had been on Sumi. She had come home quieter than usual, her answers polite but brief, her eyes carrying something new. College had changed her, in ways he both welcomed and feared. She spoke of rallies and elections with a spark he had never seen before, of friends who argued about politics late into the night, of a world beyond the mist and the cardamom rows. Luckachen had listened during dinner, nodding at the right moments, but inside he felt the old tug of pride mixed with unease. The hills had always kept their daughters close. Now the world outside was calling her name.

A faint noise from the lower fields had drawn his attention earlier — a soft thud, perhaps a branch falling, or something else. He had waited, listening. That was when Mattaikochu appeared out of the darkness, climbing the steps to the veranda with the careful steps of a man who knew these paths blindfolded.

Mattaikochu often did his rounds after dinner. It was habit, born of years watching over the estate. He would walk the boundaries with a torch and a long stick, checking for signs of wild animals — boars rooting near the pepper vines, porcupines gnawing at the young plants,

or elephants straying down from the forest edge. He also inspected the simple traps laid along the fences: loops of rope or shallow pits meant to catch smaller intruders without harm, just enough to scare them off. The hills were generous, but they demanded vigilance.

Tonight, Mattaikochu's face was grim under the weak veranda light. He had not come for the usual report.

"Ichaaya," he said in a low voice, glancing toward the dark windows of the house. "One of the Bihar workers. Raju. Found him lying near the lower stone face — down in the stream below the quarry edge. I checked him. No movement. Body was still, no breath."

Luckachen straightened slowly. "How?"

"Looks like he fell in the dark. But..." Mattaikochu paused, his weathered face tight with worry. "There are marks, Ichaaya. Bruises on the arms, the neck. Dark, deep ones."

He continued, the words tumbling out now. "I checked with our labour camp — eight hundred meters from where we found him. They'd seen him in the evening, eating supper with the others. No one saw him leave after that. They're frightened now. Already talking about warnings, about the hills being angry."

Luckachen's eyes narrowed, gazing into the mist where Ittichen's ridge lay hidden. He knew that stone face well — the hard granite seam that ran through his lower fields. Ittichen had coveted it for years, ever since the quarry scouts marked it as prime: thick, clean rock, easy to cut, close to the road. Offers had come before, polite at first, then insistent, sometimes through mutual friends over tea, sometimes in sharper tones at panchayat meetings. Luckachen had always refused. The land was his father's, and his father's before him. Selling it would mean giving Ittichen the ridge line, the water source, the advantage. More than that, it would mean admitting the old ways were dying, that the hills were no longer ruled by families who planted and harvested, but by men who blasted and crushed.

"Have you called the police?" Luckachen asked.

"Not yet, Ichaaya. The foreman wanted your word first. He thinks we should say it was an accident. Keep the police away. Says they'll only bring trouble for everyone."

Luckachen stood, the wooden chair creaking behind him. His jaw set in that way Mattaikochu knew meant the decision was already made.

"Call them," Luckachen said, his voice hard and clear. "Call them now. Tell them everything. I'll be at the camp in twenty minutes."

Mattaikochu nodded, already pulling out his phone as he stepped back into the night.

Luckachen paused at the threshold, hand resting briefly on the doorframe as he anticipated the heated gossip at the Thopramkudy tea shops the next morning. A thin line of light still glowed beneath Sumi's door — she was awake, perhaps lost in thoughts of college, of friends, of a world beyond these mist-bound hills. He could hear the faint sound of her moving about in her room, settling in for sleep.

Let her have one more night of peace, he thought. Let this darkness wait until morning.

He put on his trademark white kurta, took his keys and phone, and walked quietly to the vehicle parked under the car shed. The engine's low growl cut through the silence as he drove down the estate road, headlights slicing narrow paths through the white void.

Behind him, the veranda chair still held the faint warmth of where he had sat.

But this time, there would be evidence. This time, he would make sure the truth didn't get buried with the body.

The hills were silent as he drove into the mist, headlights barely cutting through the white void. But something had shifted in that silence.

The storm had arrived. But Luckachen had spent a lifetime learning how to stand in the wind.

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The mist clung to the valleys like a shroud, thicker than usual, as if the night's secrets were too heavy to lift. By eight, two police jeeps crawled up the estate road, their red lights pulsing faintly through the grey. The sub-inspector, a stocky man with a thick moustache and eyes weary from too many "accidents", stepped out first, followed by constables and a handler with a sniffer dog straining at its leash, eager for a trail that wouldn't come.

Mattaikochu met them at the labour camp gate, files tucked under his arm, his voice steady and respectful — the tone of a man who knew how to speak to power without grovelling. He led them through the barracks, past the common kitchen where breakfast fires still smoked, to the stream's edge where Raju's body had been found.

Luckachen had returned home before dawn. He'd stood at the water's edge as the first light touched the rocks, studying the broken angle of Raju's neck, the bruises on his throat — finger marks, defensive wounds. No loose stones to explain a fall. Just the quiet evidence of a crime dressed as an accident. He'd covered the body with a clean sheet and waited for the police, his jaw set, his decision already made: Cooperate. Let them see everything.

Now, back on his veranda, coffee cooling in his hand, he watched the inspection unfold. The dog sniffed along the paths, paused near the pepper rows, then sat without alert. The handler shrugged — no trail, no answers. The workers stood in a line, lungis and faded shirts clutched in calloused hands, their silence heavier than the mist. The sub-inspector's questions — When did you last see Raju? Any arguments? — met only lowered eyes and murmurs: "After supper, sir." "No, sir." "We sleep early."

The sub-inspector's pen paused above his notebook. He'd been in enough labour camps to know the difference between men who were hiding things from him and men who were hiding things from someone else entirely.

Without witnesses, the report would note the bruises, whisper of foul play, then be filed away like all the others. He knew the drill: note the

bruises, file the report, and let the Panchayat secretary 'lose' it by next week. Another death, another closed file, just how the hills kept their secrets.

While the sub-inspector's pen scratched against his notebook. Somewhere beyond the mist, a phone rang once, then stopped. The foreman's eyes flicked toward the ridge where Ittichen's farmhouse lights burned — just visible through the haze.

Somewhere a name would be whispered. The file would close before it ever truly opened.

By noon, the jeeps rolled down the winding road, their promises as empty as the mist parting to reveal the quarry's jagged edge — not just a cliff, but a warning cut into the land itself.

****

At dusk, Luckachen walked the labour camp with his torch, the beam sweeping over empty huts. A child's broken chappal lay by the communal tap, still warm from the sun. He picked it up, placed it on a windowsill like a grave marker, then turned away, only to catch his reflection in a rain barrel: a man alone in a ghost town of his own making.

He thought of Sumi's face at breakfast — her questions about the police, her trust that he could fix this. The hills had always protected their own. Now they were turning.

Inside the house, Onam preparations continued in uneasy quiet.

Ancy moved through the kitchen with determined cheer, chopping vegetables for the sadhya, arranging the pookalam with fresh marigolds and jasmine. She hummed an old festival song, trying to fill the silence with normalcy. But her hands moved too quickly, her smiles were too bright, and every time a vehicle passed on the road below, she glanced toward the window.

Sumi helped lay the banana leaves on the dining mat, her movements careful, her mind elsewhere. The night before, muffled voices from the

veranda had pulled her from sleep — her father's low command, Mattaikochu's urgent tone. She had gotten up, pressed her ear to the door, caught fragments: “body in the stream...", “police...”, “Ittichen’s people...”

She thought of her moments with Sunil and college, of college rallies, fashion parade during college festival, hostel fun moments and felt the hills close in around her like a cage.

This morning, she had woken to the sound of police jeeps rumbling past the gate. She'd stood at her bedroom window, watching them wind down toward the labour camp, red lights painting the mist. When she'd asked her mother what was happening, Ancy had smiled that too-bright smile and said, “Nothing of concern. It’s just some plantation business, mole. Go help with the avial in the kitchen.”

But Sumi had seen her father's face at breakfast — the hardness in his jaw, the way his eyes kept drifting toward the hills, the coffee growing cold in his cup. She had seen that look before, years ago, when a neighbour’s land dispute had turned violent. It was the look of a man preparing for battle.

During the sadhya, the family sat around the spread — avial steaming, thoran fragrant with coconut — but the festival foods tasted like duty, not celebration. Ancy tried to keep it light, asking Sumi about college food, about new friends, about whether she was eating enough.

"The hostel warden is very strict," Sumi said, moving rice around her leaf. "Seven o'clock curfew, no exceptions."

"Good, good," Ancy replied, serving more sambar. "Safety is important. So many things happening these days..."

She trailed off, realizing her mistake. Luckachen's gaze drifted toward the window again, toward the hills beyond. His hand moved mechanically, bringing food to his mouth without tasting it.

Sumi felt the weight settle over the table like an uninvited guest. Something had changed, and no one would name it. The festival that

should have been joyful felt hollow, the traditional foods tasting like duty rather than celebration.

After the meal, while Ancy was washing vessels and her father retreated to his study, Sumi stood at her bedroom window again.

She thought about calling Priya, asking if Sunil knew anything about police at estates, about deaths in labour camps. But what would she say? That her father's world was darker than she'd imagined? That the hills she loved were built on someone else's blood?

When the telephone abruptly stopped after two rings, Sumi stared at the receiver sitting at the corner of the main hall.

She thought about the brief call with Sunil that morning, caught while her parents were in the lower fields. His voice had been careful, unhurried. 'Whenever you're ready,' he had said. She had wanted to ask: what if I'm never ready? But the words hadn't come. They rarely did, when they mattered most.

Instead, she later called Priya: "Tell Giri I'll walk in the parade. But I'm choosing my own dress. Traditional, but mine."

She put the receiver down glancing at the door to make sure her father isn't listening and watched the mist return with evening, wrapping the valley in white silence.

****

Word of the death spread faster than any jeep could travel.

Giri stood in the centre of the town square, the bamboo pole of his flag feeling heavier than usual. Around him, the "pragmatic" talk of the party seniors turned the morning's grief into a ledger of opportunity. He heard them whispering about voting blocs and residence permits, calculating how Raju's silence could be turned into a loud enough noise to shake the next election. It turned his stomach to realize that Raju had only become visible to the village the moment he stopped moving. The unions weren't here to bury a man; they were here to harvest a cause.

The next day, they announced a joint agitation march from the town square to the Collectorate.

The banners had been painted overnight — broad strokes of red and black, the slogans blunt as hammers. Giri read them as he walked and felt the usual gap between what they said and what they meant.

Giri joined the political contingent early. This wasn't just about one labourer to him. It was about the land, the workers, the future, everything Luckachen had taught him to fight for without ever saying so in as many words. He arrived at the town square with a group of college party workers and local friends, wearing a plain white shirt rolled to the elbows, the party flag tied to a bamboo pole he'd carried from the office. The march swelled as it moved, students, party workers, local labourers, even shopkeepers pulling down their shutters to join in. The smell of sweat and cardamom from the roadside plantations hung over the dust kicked up by hundreds of feet.

A stray dog darted alongside the procession for a stretch, barking sharply at the waving flags before veering off into an alley. Near a small tea shop on the curve, a lone migrant worker in a faded blue shirt stood watching silently, glass of chai forgotten in his hand, eyes reflecting something between fear and recognition. He knew that voice raised in anger on his behalf would not protect him when the march ended and the night came again.

Slogans rose in waves

"Workers unite! Owners exploit!"

"Justice for Raju!"

"No more deaths for profit!"

Giri's voice carried strong among them. The entire marching contingent turned into a dharana, initiated by Giri in front of Luckachen's house. He told himself it was purely about justice — the death of a poor labourer could not go unanswered, must not be swept aside like so much quarry dust. But deeper down, he felt the eyes on

him: local reporters with phones raised, recording everything; party seniors standing on the pavement, noting who shouted loudest, who carried the flag highest, who led from the front. This would be remembered when panchayat elections came around.

As the march climbed the winding road toward the hills, Giri glanced upward, half-expecting to see familiar rooftops. Luckachen's estate was up there somewhere, hidden in the mist. A small thrill mixed with unease, he wondered if Sumi's father was watching, if he would approve or disapprove of seeing Giri here, voice raised, demanding justice.

He didn't know that a few kilometres away, Sunil was probably still asleep, dreaming of jalebi boxes and small smiles at hostel gates, unaware that the world his love lived in was far darker than college festivals and fashion parades.

****

From his veranda high above the road, Luckachen watched the river of people wind upward that morning.

The banners snapped in the breeze, voices echoing faintly off the hills. He spotted Giri almost immediately — the height, the broad shoulders, the steady way he walked at the front of his group, leading a chant without hesitation. The same young man he'd seen at the registrar's office years ago during his father's work, now grown into something more.

Surprise crossed Luckachen's face first, then something more measured: recognition.

This was not the performative anger of the MLA who would arrive later with cameras. This was the real thing — a young man who believed what he was shouting, who walked at the front rather than directing from behind. Luckachen felt a flicker of pride, quickly tempered by caution. Politics in the hills was a double-edged knife. It could raise a man up, or cut him down before he knew the blade was drawn.

He watched until the march disappeared around the bend, then turned back to his coffee, now cold.

That one, he thought. That one might be different.

****

The same evening, the local MLA, K T Thomas, ambitious, sharp-tongued, always mindful of headlines and the next election cycle, held a press conference outside the Collectorate gates.

Microphones clustered around him like bees drawn to nectar. Cameras pointed, reporters' pens poised. He wore his cleanest white shirt, his most serious expression, playing the role he'd perfected over three terms in the assembly.

"Certain powerful farm owners treat migrant workers as disposable commodities!" he declared, his voice rising with practiced outrage, eyes fierce for the cameras. "Turning our beautiful hills into graveyards for profit! This government will not stand silent. Strict action will be taken against those responsible for this tragedy. The blood of innocent labourers cries out for justice." MLA paused for a heartbeat, ensuring the sun hit his starched white shirt just right for the cameras, before his voice cracked with a practiced, theatrical grief.

He named no one directly. In Thopramkudy, no name was required. The message landed exactly where intended — on Luckachen's doorstep, in tomorrow's newspapers, in the minds of anyone who might think about standing against Ittichen's interests.

Luckachen heard it on the radio while driving to the lower fields that afternoon. His grip tightened on the steering wheel, jaw clenching. So, this was how it would be played — paint him as the villain, the cruel landowner grinding workers into dust, while Ittichen sat in his glass farmhouse above the valley, untouched and unnamed.

The storm had arrived. But Luckachen had spent a lifetime learning how to stand in the wind.

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7
The Weight of the Land

September 1999

Two days later, white vans from the state labour department arrived without warning, accompanied by the same police team. They inspected every camp in the region systematically, starting with Luckachen's — tea served in steel glasses, muster rolls neat, quarters immaculate. The lead officer ran a finger along the mesh of the ventilation fans and watched the water disappear down the kitchen drains, his silence more taxing than any question.

Then they drove across the ridge to Ittichen's larger setup. The inspection took longer there — more workers, more buildings, more questions. Luckachen didn't know what they found, but when the vans returned down the main road hours later, the officers' faces were carefully neutral.

As the white Traveller of the Labour Department crawled up the estate road, Sumi watched from the upstairs window, her fingers gripping the wooden railing. Below, she saw her father standing on the veranda, his back as straight as a rifle, meeting the officers' gaze without a flicker of doubt. She realised then, with a sharp jolt of recognition, that she wasn't afraid of him; she was built from him. She noticed her own jaw was locked in the exact same line as his. She had the same habit of standing perfectly still when the world got loud, a trait she'd inherited from the man who saw emotion as a breach of discipline. She was the oak's branch — just as unbending, even if she was secretly leaning toward a different horizon.

Then came the smaller estates scattered between, each receiving the same thorough examination. Wages verified, living conditions photographed, workers interviewed in careful privacy. The officers asked about complaints, about treatment, about accidents. None were

voiced aloud — not with the camp owners standing nearby, not with the fear of losing even these meagre jobs in an economy that offered nothing better.

The process took all day. By evening, the officers left with polite thanks and sharp eyes that had seen everything and revealed nothing.

****

That same night, six Bihar workers approached Mattaikochu quietly after supper.

They stood in the dim light of the common room, bags already packed, eyes downcast.

"We are going home, Chetta," one said, voice low. The eldest among them, maybe forty, with grey in his hair. "The hills feel wrong now. My wife has been calling, crying. She says, “Come back. Our children are scared."

Mattaikochu didn't argue. He went to the office, pulled out the advance wages they were owed, counted it carefully in front of them.

"You'll need to inform the police station about leaving," he said gently. "The inquiry is still open. Just a formality. Give them your home addresses."

They nodded, taking the money with careful hands.

One young man — barely twenty, eyes hollow with something beyond exhaustion — touched Mattaikochu's feet briefly in gratitude before turning away. "Thank you, Chetta. You have been good to us. But the hills... something is watching. We can feel it."

The rooms were colder than they had been for months, stripped of the scent of woodsmoke and cheap tobacco, leaving only the ghost-like indentations on thin mattresses.

Whispers rippled through the remaining men: The hills are angry. The old gods are waking. More will die if we stay.

Word reached Luckachen at breakfast. He set down his coffee cup slowly, staring at the cooling liquid.

"How many left?" he asked.

"Six," Mattaikochu said. "More are talking about it. They're afraid."

Luckachen said nothing, but his jaw tightened. Ittichen was winning without lifting a finger — driving away the labour, making the camps unsustainable, forcing the land to be sold not through offers but through simple economics.

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The police investigation did not end with the first visit.

They returned twice more, once to re-question the foreman Rakesh, once to measure distances from camp to stone face, to photograph angles and slopes, to reconstruct what might have happened in the dark.

One quiet evening, the sub-inspector arrived at the house itself, notebook in hand, his demeanour different — more formal, less routine.

"Just a few follow-up questions, sir," he said as they sat in the front room under the slow ceiling fan. Ancy brought tea without being asked, the good cups reserved for guests.

“You were home the night of the incident?"

"Yes," Luckachen replied. "With my family. Sumi had just returned from college. We ate. We talked. I was here until Mattaikochu arrived.”

"And the deceased, Raju, you knew him?"

"I knew of him. Mattaikochu handles the day-to-day affairs with the workers. But I walk the camp weekly, speak to them about conditions, any problems. Raju had never approached me directly."

The sub-inspector made notes, his pen scratching softly. "There have been...rumours. About the quarry's interest in your lower land. The stone face area."

Luckachen sipped his tea calmly. "Rumours are common in the hills. Yes, Ittichen has made offers. I've declined. The land is not for sale."

"Could this have been... a message? A warning?"

"If it was," Luckachen said, meeting his eyes directly, "then you should be investigating Ittichen's camps, not mine."

A pause. The fan creaked overhead.

"We're investigating everything, sir," the sub-inspector said finally. He closed his notebook and stood. "Thank you for the tea. We may need to speak again."

As Luckachen stood on the veranda, watching the police jeeps disappear into the mist, his fingers tightened around the steel tumbler until his knuckles turned white. For a fleeting second, he imagined Sumi's face in the morning paper — "Daughter of Estate Owner Found in Quarry Accident" and his stomach twisted. No. He would not let Ittichen turn her into a pawn. He set the glass down with deliberate care, the clink of metal on wood restoring his composure.

Sumi emerged from where she'd been lingering in the kitchen doorway, ears straining to catch fragments of the conversation. She'd heard words like "quarry" and "dispute" and "warning." Her father's voice had remained calm throughout, but she'd seen the way his fingers tightened around the glass, knuckles whitening.

"Papa?" she said softly.

He looked up, and for a moment she saw him clearly — not the stern father, but a tired man facing something larger than family dinners and college fees.

"It's nothing, mole," he said, the lie gentle but obvious. "Just police matters. Don't worry."

But she was worrying. How could she not? The world she'd thought she knew — the safe, orderly world of her father's estate, of Onam celebrations and weekend visits — was showing cracks, and through those cracks, darkness was sweeping in.

****

Then came the mediator.

He arrived at dusk three days later. Sebastian Chettan, an elderly retired headmaster whom both Luckachen and Ittichen still greeted with folded hands and genuine respect. He had taught their children, mediated their fathers' disputes, stood as witness at their weddings. In Thopramkudy, his word still carried weight that money and muscle could not buy.

He climbed the steps slowly, envelope in hand, his face carefully neutral — the expression of a man who did not enjoy his errand but would not refuse it either.

"Luckachen," he said, accepting a glass of water. "I come on behalf of Ittichen Chettan. You know I would not do this if I didn't believe it necessary."

Luckachen nodded, waiting.

Sebastian Chettan placed the envelope on the teapoy between them. "He is prepared to make a very fair offer for the lower plot — the stone face area. He believes unified ownership would benefit everyone. Fewer...misunderstandings in future. Fewer tragedies."

The last word hung in the air, weighted with meaning.

Luckachen took the envelope but did not open it. He held it for a moment. It felt heavier — not the weight of paper, but of the choice it represented.

He remembered his own father refusing a similar offer decades ago, standing on this same veranda, voice firm as the hills themselves: "The land stays whole. Once you sell a piece, you admit the rest can be bought."

"Tell him," Luckachen said slowly, placing the envelope back on the teapoy, "that I will think on it carefully. These are grave matters. They require proper consideration."

Sebastian Chettan nodded, understanding the answer beneath the words. He finished his water, blessed the house with a small sign of the cross, and left as quietly as he had come.

After the gate closed, Luckachen sat in the dim front room, the envelope still unopened on the teapoy. Ancy appeared in the doorway, her silhouette backlit by the kitchen lamp.

"You won't even look?" she asked softly.

He shook his head. "I know what it says. Numbers change. The answer doesn't."

She was quiet for a moment, then: "And if there are more... accidents?"

"Then we call the police again. And again. Until even they grow tired of pretending not to see."

Ancy sighed and returned to the kitchen. The envelope remained where he'd left it, gathering the evening's dust — his answer made without needing to see the amount written inside.

After the house had settled into the uneasy quiet of the night, Luckachen did his final round. He paused outside Sumi's door. He didn't knock, that would be a violation of the boundaries they had lived by for years, but he reached out and tested the latch, ensuring it was secure against the world outside.

He looked at the heavy teak wood of the door, the same wood he had personally selected when he built this house with his army discharge pay. Every acre he defended from Ittichen, every legal threat he stared down, was another brick in the wall he was building around her. To the village, he was a stubborn landlord; to himself, he was a sentry on a permanent, silent watch. His love wasn't something he knew how to put into a hug or a holiday greeting; his love was the fact that his

daughter could sleep in a house where the doors were solid and the name 'Thurutel' still acted as a shield.

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That afternoon, a police jeep returned to the estate.

This time the summons was formal. Luckachen was requested to present himself at the station for further questioning. Not asked. Requested. The difference was subtle but clear.

He drove down alone, the jeep winding through roads now familiar with tension. He parked in the small lot outside the station, walked through the door where a constable barely glanced up from his newspaper, and was shown to a small room with a metal table and two chairs.

The questioning lasted nearly four hours.

Same questions, reframed with sharper edges. New ones probing quarry rivalries, land disputes, worker treatment, the timing of the labour department inspection, whether he'd pressured anyone to lie. The tone had shifted noticeably from routine inquiry to something harder, more accusatory.

Had he threatened any workers? Had he been to the quarry site recently? Did he know that the deceased had been seen arguing with someone the week before? What was his relationship with Ittichen? Had they had any confrontations?

Luckachen answered calmly, consistently, his voice never rising, his answers measured. Yes, Ittichen had made offers. No, there had been no threats, no confrontations beyond normal business disagreements. Yes, he ran a clean camp. No, he had never mistreated workers. The records spoke for themselves.

They released him as evening fell, the sky turning purple over the hills. "We may need you again," the sub-inspector said at the door, not quite looking at him.

Luckachen drove home in silence, understanding perfectly what had happened. Pressure had been applied from above. The investigation was being steered, shaped, bent toward a predetermined conclusion. Not justice. Control.

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Late that night, long after the house had settled into uneasy sleep, Mattaikochu climbed the veranda steps once more.

His footsteps were hurried this time, his breath carrying the sweet-sharp scent of toddy, his eyes bright with discovery and something like fear.

"Ichaaya," he said, voice urgent as they moved quickly into the small office and closed the door against listening ears. "I took Rakesh, the Bihar foreman, to the toddy shop below the church. Three bottles, on my coin. He finally opened up."

Luckachen sat behind the desk, hands folded, waiting in silence. Mattaikochu had learned over the years when silence was permission to continue.

"He was reluctant at first," Mattaikochu explained, his words coming faster now. "Kept looking over his shoulder even in the toddy shop, even with music playing and other men loud around us. But the third bottle loosened his tongue."

He leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "Two of our men, Raju and Shankar, had been courting the same woman. Lakshmi, the camp cook. Young woman, maybe twenty-five, came here to earn money to send home. Small quarrels between the men for days, nothing serious, whose turn to carry water for her, who got to sit near her at meals. Boys being boys."

Luckachen's expression didn't change, but he gestured for Mattaikochu to continue.

"But the night Raju died," Mattaikochu's voice dropped lower, "one of Ittichen's workers came to our camp boundary after dark. Rakesh saw

him himself — recognized the man from the quarry crew. Said nothing then, afraid to interfere. This worker handed Raju a full bottle through the fence. Strong local arrack, not the usual mild stuff we give them on paydays. Premium quality, the kind that burns going down."

Mattaikochu paused, letting the implication settle.

"Raju drank heavily. More than he ever had. Got loud, aggressive. Started fighting with Shankar right there in the common yard — shouting, pushing, saying terrible things about the woman. Real fight, not the small quarrels from before. Shankar pushed back, hit him once, twice. Then Raju stormed off alone into the night, cursing everyone, saying he'd show them all. Rakesh tried to stop him, but Raju was wild with drink and anger. No one dared follow into the dark."

The room was completely silent except for the faint ticking of the old wall clock.

"Next morning," Mattaikochu continued, "the body in the stream. Neck broken, bruises on the arms and throat. But here's what Rakesh swears, Ichaaya. Shankar never left the camp that night. Staying in his bed, everyone saw him. Whoever met Raju in the dark near the stone face... it wasn't anyone from our camp."

He sat back, his revelation complete.

Luckachen leaned back slowly in his chair, hands steepled under his chin. For a long moment he said nothing, his eyes fixed on the wall above Mattaikochu's head, his mind turning over the pieces like a farmer inspecting stones in a field.

Then, slowly, a smile touched the corners of his mouth.

Not triumphant. Not bitter. But the smile of a man who has just seen his opponent's hand clearly for the first time, who understands the game being played, who knows now exactly where he stands on the board.

He understood everything now.

Ittichen had not renewed his offer out of kindness or fair business practice.

He had staged a warning — a deliberate, carefully orchestrated message. Provide the bottle. Start the fight. Send a man walking angry and drunk into the dark. Have someone waiting by the stone face trail. Make it look like an accident, drunken fight, tragic fall, bruises explained by the rocky descent. Plausible deniability for everyone involved.

And then, while the body cooled and the police investigated, send the mediator with an envelope. See what happens when you refuse? This could all go away. Just sign the papers. Sell the land. Accept the inevitable.

Luckachen looked out toward the dark ridge where Ittichen's farmhouse lights burned, steady and distant. He realized now that his opponent wasn't trying to take his king in one loud strike; he was simply narrowing the space, closing the exits one by one until the only move left was to step off the board entirely. This was the beauty of the trap: a design that looked like an accident, a pressure that required no direct confrontation, and a tragedy that made the victim look guilty while the attacker remained invisible in the mist.

It was an encirclement, the kind he'd studied in field manuals, but he knew that even a narrowed space offered a line of fire, if you were patient enough to wait for it.

He looked out towards the dark ridge and tonight the mist hid everything including Ittichen's farmhouse. But he knew they were there. Watching. Waiting for his response.

His father had refused once, and the hills had stayed quiet for a generation.

Now the refusal would cost more. Would demand more. Would require not just stubborn pride but strategic thinking, careful planning of a war to be fought in meetings and court rooms rather than in dark streams at midnight.

But Luckachen had never been a man to yield ground. Not to the army when they'd told him a farmer's son couldn't rise through the ranks. Not to his own father when the old man had tried to arrange a different marriage. Not to the market when cardamom prices crashed and everyone said, “Sell early, take the loss.”

He had outlasted them all through patience, through discipline, through understanding that some battles were won not by dramatic gestures but by refusing to break.

The board had been set long ago, the day Ittichen's father had sent that first inquiry about buying land, the day the quarry scouts had marked the stone face on their maps.

Now the first piece had been moved openly.

And Luckachen knew exactly how he would answer.

Not with rage. Not with fear. Not by selling.

But by taking this game to a different board entirely. One where Ittichen's money and muscle mattered less, where law and procedure and public scrutiny could be weapons just as sharp as whatever blade had met Raju in the dark.

He would fight. But carefully. Strategically.

The way his army instructors had taught him: identify the terrain; know your enemy's strengths and weaknesses; choose your battles; protect your supply lines; never advance without a line of retreat.

"Mattaikochu," he said without turning from the window, "tomorrow you'll take Rakesh to my lawyer in Kottayam. Have him write down everything, every detail, every name, every time. Get it notarized. Make three copies. One stays with the lawyer. One goes to Fr Mathew for safekeeping. One we keep here."

"And the police, Ichaaya?"

Luckachen turned, his face calm but his eyes hard as the granite Ittichen wanted so badly.

"Not yet. First, we build the case properly. Gather evidence. Find witnesses willing to speak when the time is right. Then, when we're ready, we'll give them something they can't ignore, even with pressure from above."

Mattaikochu nodded slowly, understanding. This was the Luckachen he knew — the one who'd risen from farm boy to Havildar not through connections but through patient, relentless competence. The one who planned three moves ahead.

"One more thing," Luckachen said. "Increase security on the lower fields. Extra men on night watch. No one works alone near the stone face. And Mattaikochu..."

"Ichaaya?"

"Find out who Ittichen sent with that bottle. Someone from the quarry crew, you said. Rakesh recognized him. Get me a name."

"It may take time. These men, they're loyal to Ittichen. Afraid of him."

"Everyone has a price," Luckachen said quietly. "Not always money. Sometimes it's safety. Sometimes it's justice for a friend. Find what moves them, and we'll find our witness."

After Mattaikochu left, Luckachen stood alone in the office, the envelope from Sebastian Chettan still visible on his desk in the other room, unopened and already irrelevant.

He thought about Sumi sleeping upstairs, dreaming of college and friends and a future she imagined was hers to choose. He thought about Ancy worrying in the next room, praying her rosary in the dark. He thought about the workers in the camp below, packing their bags in fear, running from hills that had once meant hope and wages.

And he thought about the young man he'd seen at the head of that march. Giri, shouting for justice, leading from the front, believing his voice mattered.

That one might understand, Luckachen thought. Someday. When he's ready. When he sees what I see. That the real enemies aren't the ones

we fight with fists and pride. The real enemies are the ones who destroy from within, who corrupt what should be clean, who turn the hills themselves into weapons.

But not yet. First, this battle. This careful, dangerous game of evidence and law and public pressure.

Then, perhaps, allies could be found. Even in unexpected places.

The hills remained silent outside his window, wrapped in mist and secrets.

But Luckachen was done being silent. He didn't know that his daughter, a few kilometres away, was learning the same lesson in a different way. The next move was his.

And Ittichen would learn what the army had, what the market had, what every man who'd ever underestimated Luckachen had: the hills might bend, but they never broke.

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8
The Harvest of Silence

September 1999

The Onam holidays stretched across Thopramkudy like a lamp not yet lit. Usually, this week was defined by the scent of frying banana chips and the competitive pride of village pookalams, but this year, the festival lightness was crushed under a heavy, invisible weight.

Sumi woke on the first morning after Thiruvonam to a house that felt fundamentally wrong. It wasn't an obvious disorder; the banana leaves from the previous day's sadhya had been cleared with her mother's usual efficiency, and the floral arrangement in the courtyard still bloomed in careful, vibrant circles. Yet, the silence was thicker than she remembered. It was a silence that carried mass, pressing against the windows like the mountain mist that refused to lift.

She lay in the dimness of her room, listening for the sounds that had anchored her childhood but were now missing. There were no labourers' voices drifting up from the lower camps, no distant crackle of a radio playing Hindi film songs from Mattaikochu's quarters. The usual morning chatter had been replaced by the low, predatory rumble of a vehicle on the estate road. Police. Again.

Rising, she washed her face in water so cold it made her gasp — mountain water piped directly from a spring higher up the ridge. She dressed in an old cotton salwar, soft from years of use, and padded barefoot to the kitchen. Her mother, Ancy, was already there, chopping beans with a mechanical, frantic precision. The knife moved with a sharp, rhythmic staccato, each piece cut to an identical length as if the perfect symmetry of a vegetable could somehow offset the chaos outside.

"Amma?" Sumi whispered.

Ancy started, her face momentarily naked — worry etched into the lines around her eyes before the familiar mask of maternal calm slid back into place. "Mole, you're up," she said, her voice a forced cheer. "Help me with the thoran. The coconut needs grating."

Settling onto a low stool by the window, Sumi began the rhythmic work. Through the glass, she watched her father on the veranda. He was flanked by two constables, their dark uniforms a jarring contrast against the morning light. Mattaikochu stood nearby, clutching a file like a shield. Her father's voice was a low, steady rumble, answering questions with a discipline that allowed no room for doubt.

The smell of fresh coconut filled the room, mixing with the lingering jaggery of yesterday's payasam. It was a sweet, heavy scent that usually meant home, but today it felt like a reminder of a peace that was slipping away.

"How long have they been here?" Sumi asked, the grater's teeth biting into the white flesh.

"Since seven," Ancy replied, her knife never pausing. "Third time this week. Always the same questions."

"About the worker?"

The knife stopped. Ancy didn't look up. "Don't worry about such things, mole. Your studies are more important. Focus on that." But Sumi saw the tremor in her mother's hands. She had heard the midnight whispers through the walls, her father's steel-cold directives and Mattaikochu's urgent, fearful replies.

When the police jeep finally rolled away into the white void of the mist, Luckachen appeared in the doorway. His white kurta was crisp, his face an unreadable mask of army discipline.

"Tea," was all he said.

He took the steaming tumbler, nodded his thanks, and retreated to his office. The door closed behind him without a sound, which somehow felt worse than a slam.

Sumi and her mother worked in silence for the next hour, preparing food that neither of them felt like eating, filling the house with cooking smells that couldn't quite cover the heaviness in the air.

Later, out from kitchen Sumi found her father on the veranda, sorting a mountain of cardamom pods. His calloused fingers moved with surgical precision, a habit of labour that required no words. In the High Ranges, one didn't ask a man if he was tired; one simply joined the work. She sat across from him and began sorting, discarding the shrivelled pods. Luckachen didn't thank her, but he slid a larger bowl toward her, making room for her presence. In that ten-minute "song of silence," the clicking of pods against wood offered the only peace they could find.

But back in her room, the peace vanished. She thought of Sunil's world, of college rallies and the vibrant colour of the upcoming fashion parade, and felt the hills of Thopramkudy close in around her like a cage.

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In Poonjar, Sunil woke to a world that was aggressively, cruelly cheerful. Sunlight flooded his room, and the sound of his mother humming in the kitchen was a sharp contrast to the silence of his phone.

There was a strict restriction from Sumi against calling her landline. In a household like Luckachen's, a boy's voice on the telephone was a declaration of war. But not knowing and hearing nothing from Sumi was slow torture.

Sunil had tried ringing a few times, his heart hammering against his ribs, only to hang up after two rings — the coward's code.

Once, a woman's voice, sharp and questioning, had answered with a "Hello, Who is this?" that made his hand tremble as he slammed the receiver back into its cradle.

At the breakfast table, Dayana watched him with eyes that saw too much. "So," she said, her voice dripping with calculated innocence, "how's Sumi?"

"Fine," Sunil muttered, focusing on his puttu.

"I've seen you playing with the landline frequently," Dayana teased, her smile sharpening. "So eager to hear her voice, but so afraid of who might pick up the receiver."

Sunil's face burned. Even his mother looked up, curious.

"You should focus on studying," his father's voice boomed from behind the morning newspaper. "Exams start in two weeks. These girls can wait."

But Sunil knew they couldn't.

He escaped to the central hall and dialled Giri's home number. Giri picked up, but his voice was distracted, the background filled with the scraping of chairs and the muffled shouts of a party meeting.

"Sunil, man, can't talk. We're planning the next step for the trade union march," Giri said.

"Have you heard from her? She's not answering," Sunil pressed.

Giri paused. "Things are... tense up there. Just family stuff. I'll call you later."

Tense. The word was a weight in Sunil's stomach. Had she mentioned him? Was the trouble because of them? He tried to study, but the laws of physics were no match for the gravity of his worry.

His mind kept circling back to that last conversation at the canteen steps, the small wave she'd given him before getting on the bus, the promise in her eyes that they'd talk after Onam.

Sunil's father had asked him once, casually, what Sumi's family did. 'Spices,' Sunil had said. 'Forty-two acres in Thopramkudy.'

His father had nodded slowly, wiping his hands on his mundu. Said nothing more. But Sunil had seen it — that small flicker of approval,

maybe relief. His son wasn't just chasing some girl. He was choosing well.

The thought had made Sunil uncomfortable then, made him want to defend what he felt for Sumi as pure, as beyond calculation. But that evening, he'd caught himself doing math: forty-two acres of cardamom at current prices, minus whatever loans, plus the house, the vehicle, the future value...

He'd stopped himself. Felt ashamed. It made him feel dirty, as if the love and the accounting had become the same thing, and he couldn't separate them anymore.

But he'd been doing the math anyway. Some part of his mind he didn't control, trained by watching his father check rubber prices every morning, by growing up in a family where love and land were never quite separate.

Sunil tried to ground himself in reality and opened his physics textbook, but his mind stayed in the hills.

Outside his window, the rubber trees swayed in a light breeze. The world continued its normal rhythm, oblivious to the fact that somewhere twenty kilometres away, something was wrong, and he was powerless to do anything about it.

****

Back in Thopramkudy, the police had come and gone twice more. The estate was bleeding — six more workers had left overnight, simply vanishing before dawn with their small bundles of belongings. Mattaikochu reported it at breakfast, his voice flat, defeated.

Luckachen had said nothing, just nodded and continued eating his kanji and pickle as if his workforce wasn't slowly disappearing, as if the estate wasn't starting to feel like a ship bleeding crew.

Sumi spent her days in a strange limbo. Every time she approached the landline, her mother appeared, folding laundry, needing help with salt in the sambar, always just there.

While they were shifting dry cardamom after lunch, Ancy dropped a casual, heavy bomb. "Your father has been getting inquiries. Good families. A petroleum engineer in Dubai. A doctor in Kottayam."

Sumi's hands stilled in the spice. "I just started college, Amma."

"I know, mole. But your marriage is our biggest dream."

That night, Sumi stared at the wall. Dubai meant a flat, gold souks, and safety. It meant her children would never have to worry about the price of cardamom or the rumble of police jeeps. Sunil offered none of that. He offered six acres of rubber and a hand that trembled when he gave her sweets. She wanted both, the desire and the security. No one was offering her that option.

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That evening, she found her father alone in the office room, as she knew she would. Maps and papers spread across the table, estate boundaries, worker contracts, police reports. He stood at the window, back to the door, looking toward the ridge where Ittichen's lights burned in the distance.

"Papa," she said softly from the doorway.

He turned, surprised. Sumi rarely came into this room; it had always been his space, the place where estate decisions were made, where the man who ran the hills did his calculating.

"Can I come in?"

He gestured to the chair across from the desk. She sat, hands folded in her lap, suddenly feeling like a child called to account.

"What is happening?" she asked, deciding directness was better than dancing around it. "The police. The workers leaving. Everyone is afraid. Amma won't tell me anything, and you..." she trailed off.

Luckachen studied her for a long moment. In the dim light of the desk lamp, she could see new lines around his eyes, a tiredness that hadn't been there when she'd left for college.

“You’re not a child anymore." His voice dropped, then firmed. "You deserve to know."

He sat down across from her, the old chair creaking under his weight.

"It’s about the land," he began, voice low and measured. "The lower stone face. Ittichen wants it. He’s been wanting it for years, ever since they did the geological survey and found that seam of granite. Prime quarry material. Close to the road. Easy to extract, easy to transport."

Sumi nodded slowly, remembering family dinners where this had been mentioned in passing, adults speaking in code about "offers" and "pressure."

"I’ve refused every time," Luckachen continued. "This land was your grandfather’s, and his father’s before that, from the time he migrated here from Meenachil. Once you start selling pieces, you admit the rest can be bought. And more than that..." he paused, choosing words carefully, "quarries destroy. They don’t just take the stone, they take the water, the soil, the peace. The hills become wounds that never heal."

"The worker who died," Sumi said quietly. "It was because of this?"

Luckachen didn’t answer directly. Instead he said, "Some people think accidents can make problems disappear. Fear can be as effective as money."

Sumi felt cold despite the warm evening. "So, what will you do?"

"Fight." The word was flat, final. "Legally. Quietly. With proof. I’ve already spoken to my lawyer friend, started documenting everything. Mattaikochu is gathering evidence. When the time is right, we’ll have a case even corrupt police can’t ignore."

Sumi looked at the maps spread across the table, at the careful notes in her father’s precise handwriting. An idea formed slowly, hesitantly.

"What if..." she began, then stopped.

"What if what?"

She took a breath. "What if you made the quarry less attractive? Not only on paper. In practice too. If we planted more trees around the stone face area, or started a small cooperative with the workers, those who stayed, for pepper or cardamom cultivation. Show that the land is productive, that people depend on it for livelihood. It would be harder for them to claim it's unused or better suited for extraction."

Luckachen stared at her. The silence stretched. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his face — not the polite one he gave police officers, not the tired one he'd worn all week. Something real. Warm. Proud.

"You've been listening," he said quietly. "All these years. And thinking."

Sumi felt heat rise to her cheeks. "I just... I don't want to lose this place. These hills. Everything we have here."

He reached across the table and briefly touched her hand — a rare gesture from a man who showed affection through provision rather than touch.

"Neither do I, mole." He sat back, mind already working. "A cooperative. Yes. Tie the workers' welfare directly to the land's preservation. Create stakeholders, not just employees. Document the productivity, the income generation. Build a counter-narrative."

He looked at her with new eyes, as if seeing someone he hadn't quite recognized before.

"When did you become so clever?"

"I had a good teacher," she said, smiling despite the heaviness in the air. "Even if he never realized he was teaching."

They talked for another hour, about how to structure the cooperative, which crops would work best, how to convince the remaining workers that staying meant more than just wages. It was the longest real conversation they'd had in years, maybe ever. Not father giving instructions and daughter obeying, but two people solving a problem together.

When Sumi finally left the office room, the fear hadn't disappeared. The danger was still real, still pressing. But something had shifted. She wasn't just the daughter being protected anymore. She was being trusted. Consulted.

Treated like someone who could think.

Luckachen looked toward the ridge. The lights burned steady, as they always did.

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But the trust was a double-edged sword. Later, alone in the office, Sumi turned to the desktop computer. With the slow, agonizing whine of the dial-up connection, she searched for "Ponnekuttu family Poonjar." The early internet offered only fragments — a rubber board minute, a church donation.

Four acres. Six now.

It was enough to live on, but it was nothing compared to the forty-two acres her father had built. She felt a hot flash of shame. She was auditing her heart like a ledger, measuring Sunil's worth in land.

The door creaked. Luckachen stood in the doorway, his shadow long in the dim light. For a second, she thought he'd seen, really seen, but his face was carefully blank.

"Mole? Working late?" His voice was gentle, but his eyes flicked to the phone on her desk. Lit up. Unlocked.

"Just the accounts," she lied, snapping the ledger shut with a sound like a door locking.

He didn't move. Didn't speak. Just nodded once, slow and deliberate, before turning away.

The silence he left behind was heavier than the ledger.

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In the girls' hostel in Erattupetta, Priya lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling of the empty room.

She had returned early, unable to bear the "mole" questions of her grandmother. “Why you looked so sad? If something happened? If there was a boy?”

There was a boy. That was the problem.

She thought of Giri — of how he had become a checklist of political ambitions where she was just another item to be "checked" off. She wondered if love was always this lonely, a slow unravelling into a campaign promise.

The room felt hollow without Sumi. Her bed was neatly made, her shelf holding only textbooks and a framed photo of her family — everyone standing stiff as strangers.

Tomorrow Sumi would return. In two days, classes and exams would start. Life would resume its normal rhythm.

She fell asleep wondering if love was supposed to feel this lonely.

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In his room in Thopramkudy, Giri made notes for his next speech, talking points about worker rights, about environmental protection, about holding powerful interests accountable.

Words that sounded good but felt hollow.

He kept thinking about Priya’s question: Where Do I Fit In This?

The page stayed blank. The answer wasn’t in slogans or speeches. It was in the way his hands trembled when he thought of her, in the silence that had grown between them like a third presence in the room. He still didn’t have an answer.

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The last night before college reopened, Sumi stood on the veranda alone.

The Onam decorations had been cleared away that afternoon. The pookalam dismantled, the banana trees taken down, the house returning to its everyday state. But the holiday’s ghosts lingered in the

air, mixed with the scent of rain that hadn't yet fallen and flowers that were already dying.

A distant cracker popped somewhere far down the valley, some family celebrating late, or maybe just a child who'd saved one last one. The sound was weak, swallowed almost immediately by the mist and the hills.

She looked toward the stone face, hidden in darkness. Somewhere out there, workers had died or fled. Somewhere out there, Ittichen plotted his next move. Somewhere out there, the hills waited to see who would claim them — those who wanted to plant, or those who wanted to blast.

Her bag was packed for tomorrow's early bus. Her mother had tucked in extra food, banana chips, pickles and beef fry, enough to feed half the hostel. Her father had given her a small sealed envelope, inside which she'd found four thousand rupees and a note in his precise handwriting: "For the cooperative planning, you'll need supplies."

He was taking her idea seriously. Actually, doing it.

The thought made her chest warm even as everything else felt cold and uncertain.

Behind her, the house was dark except for a single light in her parents' room. She could hear the low murmur of their voices, her father reporting something, her mother responding. The rhythm of a marriage lived in parallel, each carrying their own burdens.

She thought about Sunil in Poonjar, probably asleep by now, probably still worried about not able to speak on phone. She thought about seeing him in two days, about trying to explain a week that felt like a year.

She thought about Priya's words about Giri being distant, about how love could be tested by things that had nothing to do with the people loving each other.

And she thought about her father's smile when she'd suggested the cooperative, about being treated like someone whose ideas mattered, about finding her voice in the middle of fear.

The mist rolled in thicker, wrapping around the house like a blanket or a shroud, she couldn't tell which.

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The mist silently covered everything in white at Thopramkudy, Poonjar and Erattupetta.

No one slept easily.

Sumi lay awake thinking about cooperative plans and police visits and six-acre rubber plantations at Poonjar that felt like different worlds.

Sunil lay awake thinking about unanswered questions and two more days until he could see her.

Priya lay awake thinking about lonely love and whether waiting was strength or surrender.

Giri lay awake thinking about ambition and sacrifice and the cost of wanting too much too soon.

And in Thopramkudy, Luckachen stood at his window one last time before bed, looking toward the ridge where Ittichen's lights burned steady.

The cooperative was a good option. The legal case was building. The chess game continued. But tonight, the board felt bigger than he'd imagined. The pieces more fragile. His daughter would leave tomorrow, back to a world he couldn't fully protect her in. His wife would worry silently, as she always did. His workers — those who remained — would wake to another day of fear and uncertainty.

And somewhere in the darkness, Ittichen was planning his next move.

Nobody said it out loud, but everyone went to sleep with the same question:

What happens next?

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THE SILENCE

9
The Chessboard and the Torch

October 1999

The days after Onam blurred into a tense routine in Thopramkudy.

Luckachen stood on his veranda at dawn, counting the gaps in the labour camp like a man checking a wound. Eleven families had vanished in the nights since Raju died, leaving only eight fires burning where nineteen once flickered. The empty huts stood with their doors open, hollow shells in the grey light. He sipped his tea — black, no sugar — and felt the bitterness coat his tongue. It wasn't just the tea; it was the taste of an estate losing its breath.

Below him, Mattaikochu emerged from his quarters near the vehicle shed, moving between the huts with a notebook, doing the morning count.

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By the second week the police visits became routine, nobody looked up anymore when the jeep turned in at the gate. A constable would walk the rows slowly, not stopping anyone, not asking much, checking papers he'd already checked the week before, writing something in a small notebook nobody was allowed to see. The workers kept their heads down and their hands moving, and the ones who talked while they worked stopped talking until the jeep was gone again.

Nobody said what they were afraid of. Nobody had to. It was working on them the way poison works — slowly, and only once, and by the time you noticed, it was already in you.

Luckachen met them with the same calm he'd learned in the army — back straight, voice level, offering neither more nor less than what was asked. Mattaikochu would appear within minutes, files tucked under his arm-muster rolls, attendance registers, wage payment records, the

logbook where they documented daily activities. Everything organized, everything current, nothing to hide.

But behind the calm, Luckachen felt the shift.

Something had changed in the last two days.

The questions had grown sharper. More accusatory.

The sub-inspector's tone had shifted from routine inquiry to something harder.

Someone was pushing. Hard.

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Across the valley, in K.T. Thomas's modest bungalow near the town square, the morning had started with business masked as courtesy.

Ittichen sat in the MLA's sitting room, black tea and banana chips on the table between them. The room smelled of damp wood and incense from the morning prayer. Through the window, the hills rose in green waves, mist clinging to the highest peaks.

"The investigation is taking too long," Ittichen said, his voice calm.

"Two weeks since the accident. The file should be closed by now. Workers are talking. Questions are being asked. The longer this stays open, the more opportunities for complications."

Thomas sipped his tea, eyes thoughtful behind the casual gesture. "These things take time."

"Procedures can be expedited when necessary." Ittichen leaned back in the chair, his fingers drumming a slow, rhythmic pattern on the armrest — tap, tap, pause, like a man counting profits. "The worker died on Luckachen's land," he said, his voice smooth as the granite he coveted. "Under his supervision. Facts are simple and don't bend for sentiments." His fingers stilled.

He leaned back, fingers steepled. "What's needed is conclusion and not more investigations. A finding that allows the Labour Department

to act. Camp closure for unsafe working conditions and safety violations."

Thomas understood the game being played. "And when the camp closes?"

"Then the land sits idle. Unproductive." Ittichen's smile was slight, almost imperceptible. "Luckachen can't maintain operations without workers, can't generate income without production. Financial pressure builds. And then — " his voice dropped, "then a reasonable offer for the stone face area becomes more attractive. Not forced. Not stolen. Simply... practical."

"The opposition already made noise with that march," Thomas said, thinking of the banners, the slogans, the young student leader with the carrying voice. "If we push too visibly — "

"That march helps us, public attention on worker safety and accountability," Ittichen interrupted smoothly.

The ceiling fan creaked overhead, the only sound for a long moment. Thomas stared into his tea, seeing the reflection of his own face distorted in the dark liquid.

"This is a great opportunity," Ittichen continued, his voice taking on an almost confidential tone. "Not just to acquire land, but to acquire it properly. Through documented process.

"And if Luckachen refuses to sell even after the camp closes?"

"Then the land sits idle," Ittichen said with a shrug.

"If we can't reason with him, we'll apply more pressure. And if he still resists..." His voice dropped. "We have other ways to persuade him. Ways that target what he values most."

Thomas was quiet, thinking about the layers of pressure being applied. Official investigation. Labour Department scrutiny. Public attention from the march. Workers fleeing in fear. Financial unsustainability. Each layer plausible on its own. Together, overwhelming.

"I'll speak to the SP again," the MLA said finally.

"Gently," Ittichen added, the word soft but firm. "No direct orders that can be traced. Just helpful context. Questions about why simple matters take so long."

"I know how these conversations work," Thomas's voice carried a hint of irritation at the implication.

Ittichen stood, straightening his mundu with careful dignity. "Just ensure the pressure stays steady."

After Ittichen left, Thomas sat alone in his sitting room for a long time, looking out at the hills that gave Thopramkudy its beauty and its complications.

So much wealth buried in those slopes. Granite, minerals and timber. And so much of it locked away by men who thought land was heritage rather than resource, who held onto acres out of sentiment rather than sense.

Progress demanded sacrifice. Development required hard choices.

He picked up the phone and dialled the Superintendent of Police. When the SP answered, Thomas's voice shifted, the practised warmth of a man who knew how to ask for things without asking. He spoke of workload, of open files, of public concern. He did not mention Ittichen's name once. He didn't need to. By the time he hung up, the message had been delivered, received, and understood by everyone except the man it was designed to bury.

****

The summons came two days later, on a quiet Tuesday morning.

"Sir, we need you at the station again. Some additional clarifications required."

Luckachen recognized the tone — formal, careful, weighted with more than the words suggested. He hung up and stood for a moment at the

office window, looking toward the labour camp where smoke rose from too few fires.

He told Ancy only that he needed to visit the police station. She looked up from the vegetables she was chopping, worry clear in her eyes, but asked no questions. Just nodded and returned to her work.

He dressed carefully — crisp white kurta, the leather folder with all camp documentation. As he walked to the Jeep, Mattaikochu appeared from the vehicle shed.

"Ichaaya, I should drive you — "

"No. Stay here. Keep the workers calm." Luckachen's voice was firm. "I'll manage this myself."

The drive down took twenty minutes through roads he knew by heart. Morning mist was burning off, revealing terraced cardamom plots, pepper vines climbing support trees, the ordinary beauty of hills hiding extraordinary ugliness.

The police station looked the same as before, fading white paint, emergency numbers on a weathered board, the smell of phenyl and old files seeping through the door.

The interrogation room was small and spare. SI Mathew sat behind the metal table, files spread before him. A constable stood by the door. The barred window looked onto the neglected courtyard.

"Sir," Mathew said. "Thank you for coming."

Luckachen sat, placed his folder on the table. His legal training showed in the deliberate calm, the careful positioning, the way he met the sub-inspector's eyes directly.

"How can I help?"

The questioning began the same way it always did. Same questions, slightly rephrased. But this time, the tone was different. Sharper. More accusatory.

"Your camp's safety measures," Mathew said, flipping a page. "Workers claim the stone face wasn't marked as hazardous."

Luckachen slid a photograph across the table — a wide shot of the camp, red flags planted along the ridge. "Page 17 of the safety log. Inspected weekly. Signed by your own officer last month."

Mathew's pen hovered. "Then explain the bruises on the body."

"Ask Ittichen's men why they delivered arrack to my camp that night." Luckachen's voice was quiet.

The constable shifted. The station phone buzzed — the call that would change everything.

He stood so quickly his chair scraped loud against concrete.

"Excuse me. I need to take this. Can you please wait outside"

Luckachen, without any hesitation and with a slight smile on face, moved outside the office to the corridor, pulling the half door closed behind him. He didn't need to hear the caller's voice; the way SI Mathew's spine snapped straight and the blood drained from his face told Luckachen everything. The master had whistled, and the dog had responded.

The call lasted less than three minutes.

After the call Luckachen was called back in, Mathew wouldn't look at Luckachen. His hands shook slightly as he gathered papers, movements jerky and too fast.

"Sir," he said to the desk rather than to Luckachen's face, "we have sufficient information for now. You're free to go. We'll contact you if... if there are further questions."

Luckachen looked at the sub-inspector, really looked at him and smiled. A small, knowing smile. Not mocking. Not triumphant. Just certain.

The smile of a man who'd just seen exactly how the game was rigged, who knew who'd called, who understood what had been said, who recognized fear when he saw it.

"SI," Luckachen said softly, "when you write your final report, remember that you have to live with what you write. Long after this case is closed, long after pressures change and people move on… you'll still have to live with it. We all will."

He picked up his folder, nodded once, and walked out into the bright afternoon.

****

At Erattupetta, in his rented room near the college, Giri sat with a cup of cooling tea, staring at nothing.

He'd heard it that afternoon from a cooperative society worker he worked with — someone who did odd jobs at Ittichen's quarry, who'd been drinking at the toddy shop and let something slip. About Raju. About the bottle that came from outside the camp. About how it wasn't really an accident at all.

The words of truth hit Giri hard and he didn't move for a second.

He'd led that march two weeks ago. Stood at the front, voice raised, demanding justice for migrant workers. Speaking about exploitation, about estate owners who treated labourers as disposable, about power crushing the powerless.

And the whole time, he'd been aiming at the wrong target.

Luckachen Uncle, Sumi's father, a man Giri had known for years, respected even, hadn't been exploiting anyone. He'd been fighting the same battle Giri claimed to fight, just from a different angle. Defending his land against someone trying to steal it through manufactured crisis.

While Giri had marched and shouted and added to the pressure.

The shame sat heavy in his chest. It wasn't only that he'd been wrong. It was how easily he'd let himself be used. How readily he'd accepted the obvious narrative without asking deeper questions. How his ambition had overpowered his logical sense. Ittichen had used a worker's death to pressure Luckachen, and had used political parties and their workers, including Giri's natural instinct for justice, to create public pressure from another angle.

Everyone playing their part without understanding the whole game.

Giri stared at the cold dregs of his tea. For years, he had trained himself to look for the "angles", to calculate which slogan would catch the most ears or which march would draw the biggest crowd. He had prided himself on seeing the moves before they happened.

But as the truth of the bottle and the manufactured crisis at the camp sank in, He hated that instinct in himself. He hadn't been a leader; he had been a tool. He realized then that while he was busy shouting about justice into a megaphone, the real power in the hills had been moving in the silence he wasn't yet smart enough to hear.

Ittichen didn't need to win an argument; he just needed to make well-meaning people like Giri fight the wrong ghosts. The shame wasn't just that he was wrong, it was the realization that his ambition had made him blind to the board he claimed to master.

He thought about going to Luckachen. Apologizing. Offering to help somehow.

But what could he say? "Sorry I added to your troubles while you were fighting for survival?" The words felt hollow even thinking them.

And there was something else. Sumi. How would she see him now? Would she understand he hadn't known? Or would this always be there between them. The memory of him speaking against her father, adding weight to forces trying to destroy her family?

The tea had gone completely cold. Outside, evening was settling over the town, mist beginning to roll in from the hills.

Giri sat in the growing darkness, learning a lesson that would shape everything that came after.

That truth was more complicated than slogans. That the real enemies often weren't the obvious targets. That leadership meant asking hard questions before choosing sides, not just marching loudly toward wherever anger pointed.

The lesson tasted bitter.

But he would remember it.

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Late that evening, Luckachen walked the familiar path to the church.

The mist was thick now, his torch cutting narrow tunnels through white silence. Pepper vines released their scent when brushed. The church walls glowed faintly ahead, the simple cross barely visible against the night sky.

Fr. Mathew sat on his usual bench outside the parish house, reading by lamplight. He closed his book as Luckachen approached, the motion familiar as ritual.

"Luckachen. I've been expecting you."

They sat together, the wooden bench creaking. The night air carried jasmine and distant wood smoke. For a long moment, neither spoke.

"I heard about the police station," Fr Mathew said finally. "The questions you raised."

"Word travels fast."

"In Thopramkudy, word travels faster than mist." The priest's eyes were sharp in the lamplight. "You rattled them. Asked things they didn't want asked."

"I asked obvious questions that any real investigation would ask. About Ittichen's men at my camp boundary. About the fight between workers. About factors they're deliberately ignoring."

"And they called their master."

"They did." Luckachen smiled slightly. "Right in front of me. Couldn't even pretend otherwise."

Fr Mathew was quiet for a moment. "This is dangerous, what you're doing. Challenging power openly."

"Not openly. Carefully." Luckachen looked toward the dark ridge.

"For what purpose?"

"For later. When the truth comes out — and it will, somehow it will — there will be a record showing who asked the right questions and who refused to answer them."

The priest nodded slowly, understanding. "You're thinking like a lawyer, not an army man."

"I'm thinking like someone who learned that you don't fight power with anger. You fight it with truth, with building a case brick by brick until it can't be dismissed."

They sat in silence for a while. Then Luckachen spoke again, his voice softer.

"Father, I need to tell you something. About Sumi."

"Your daughter? Is she alright?"

"She's more than alright. She's..." Luckachen paused, searching for words. "Before she left for college, she came to me. Asked what was happening with the police, the workers leaving, everything. I told her the truth. And Father, she didn't panic. Didn't cry. She listened, thought about it, and gave me a solution."

He told the priest about the cooperative idea — the land lease, the worker partnership, the intensive cultivation plan that would make the stone face area productive and legally protected.

"I've been so focused on protecting her," Luckachen continued, "keeping her away from the darkness, treating her like a child who needed shielding. But she walked into that office and spoke like

someone who understands these hills better than I gave her credit for. Practical. Strategic. Rooted in real solutions instead of just resistance."

"She's her father's daughter," Fr Mathew said gently.

"She's better than her father." Luckachen's voice carried quiet pride. "I would have just fought, stubbornly, straightforwardly. She found a way to build something good in the middle of the fight. To create value instead of just defending it." He looked at the priest. "When she spoke, Father, I saw my father in her. That same love for the land. But I also saw something new. Vision. The ability to see possibilities I'm too old or too angry to see."

"You should tell her this."

"I will. Next time she calls, I'll tell her we're implementing her idea. That she's not just my daughter anymore — she's my partner in this. That I'm proud of who she's becoming."

The priest smiled, the lines around his eyes deepening. "Luckachen, you came back from the army to duty. To obligation. To taking care of what your father left. But maybe Sumi sees it differently. Maybe for her, this isn't burden. Maybe it's possibility. Maybe it's her responsibility."

"That's exactly it," Luckachen said. "She sees what this land could become, not just what it's been. And that perspective, that hope in the middle of pressure, that's what we need. What I need."

They sat together as the mist wrapped around them, as the night insects sang, as the hills held their ancient silence.

"Go home," Fr Mathew said finally. "Rest. From now on you'll need strength for what's coming. But tonight, allow yourself to feel proud. Of your daughter. Of the fight you're fighting. Of refusing to break."

"Thank you, Father."

Luckachen walked back through the dark estate paths, torch beam cutting through mist, his chest warm with something that felt like hope.

But a sudden, sharp irritation flared deep in his chest. He tried to swallow it down, military discipline battling biology, but the cough tore through him anyway. It was a harsh, hacking sound that rattled his ribs and left a metallic taste on his tongue. He held the rail on the boundary wall until his knuckles turned white, waiting for the spasm to pass. He quickly pulled a handkerchief to his mouth, hiding the tremor in his fingers. He couldn't afford to be sick. Not when the hills were watching for the first sign of a crack in the oak.

****

The house was dark when he returned, except for Ancy's small hallway light.

He paused at their bedroom door. She was asleep, rosary beads on her bedside table, breathing even and slow. He wanted to tell her about Sumi, about the pride swelling in his chest, about their daughter becoming someone remarkable about the cough.

But he didn't. Most things he still carried alone.

He went to the office instead, pulled out the cooperative papers, adding 'Sumi Luckachen' to the registration draft — not merely as his daughter, but as a founding member whose idea had started it all.

It wasn't just the law Luckachen had to worry about. Mattaikochu brought word that Ittichen's men were visiting the small planters nearby, offering 'interest-free' loans to those who stayed away from Luckachen's cooperative. It was a blockade dressed as a favour. Ittichen was poisoning the water before Luckachen could even build the well. Ittichen wasn't just fighting for the stone; he was trying to starve the roots of the new tree.

Outside, the labour camp showed just a few scattered lights — eleven families where there had been nineteen.

But eleven families were enough. Eleven could be partners. Eleven could defend land through law and cultivation. Eleven could build something that outlasted fear. Once it started, more would join. Local families too, he was certain of it."

Across the valley, Ittichen's lights still burned — distant and steady, as always.

But tomorrow, Luckachen would begin building something those lights couldn't extinguish. A cooperative. A legal defence. A documented case of questions refused and truths ignored.

And in the centre of it all, his daughter's vision. Her practical wisdom. Her ability to see light in darkness.

He closed the files, turned off the office light, finally allowed himself to feel the exhaustion settling into his bones.

Tomorrow would bring more pressure. More fear. More of Ittichen's careful violence.

But tomorrow would also bring work. The kind that built futures instead of just defending the past.

And Luckachen — army man, lawyer, planter, father — knew that some battles were won not through dramatic confrontation but through stubborn refusal to break.

Through asking the right questions even when no one wanted to answer.

Through building something worth defending while defending it.

Through pride in a daughter who saw clearly when mist obscured everything else.

He went to bed finally. The day loosened its grip a little and something steadier took its place.

And while the hills of Thopramkudy held their breath, the road to the college was already calling his daughter back to a world where the mist was just as thick, but the stakes were entirely different.

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10
Spotlights and Shadows

November 1999

The bus from Thopramkudy reached the college gate just as the first bell rang for the reopening day.

Sumi stepped down with her small bag, the familiar smell of frying vada and tea from the canteen hitting her like a memory she wasn't sure she wanted. The campus looked the same, the banyan tree spreading shade over the quadrangle, the physics block with its peeling paint, the hostel gate where Sr. Glory would already be standing like a sentinel. But something had shifted inside her. The week at home had left marks she couldn't explain, weight she couldn't shake.

Priya was waiting near the entrance, arms folded, eyes scanning the crowd. The moment she spotted Sumi, she pushed off from the wall and walked over, taking the bag without asking.

"You look like you carried the hills all the way," Priya said quietly.

Sumi managed a small smile. "I did."

They walked toward the hostel in silence for a while. Around them, campus life was resuming its normal rhythm — students greeting each other with the loud enthusiasm of people who'd been apart too long, seniors yelling at juniors about fest preparations, the canteen already crowded with those who'd arrived early. The college had changed in small ways since Onam. Fresh whitewash on some walls. New posters announcing the festival. The Gul mohar tree near the library had dropped most of its red flowers, leaving the ground carpeted in rust.

But Sumi felt the bigger change inside herself. A week ago, college had been her escape. Now it felt like one more place where she had to perform normalcy while carrying darkness from home.

"How bad was it?" Priya asked as they climbed the hostel steps.

"Worse than I told you." Sumi's voice was low. "Police visits every other day. Workers leaving at night. Papa going to the station for being questioned."

"Did he tell you anything more? About what really happened?"

"Mostly. Enough to know it wasn't an accident. Enough to understand why everyone's afraid." Sumi paused at their room door. "Papa's fighting it. Building some kind of case. But Priya… watching him carry that weight alone, watching Amma worry without asking questions, watching the camp empty out… I felt so useless."

Priya pushed open the door. Their room looked exactly as they'd left it. Sumi's bed neatly made, Priya's covered in books and papers, the small window looking out onto the hostel courtyard where a few girls were already gathering, catching up on holiday gossip.

"You're not useless," Priya said, setting the bag down. "You gave him an idea, didn't you? The cooperative plan?"

"Yes, but"

"Then you helped. Maybe more than you know." Priya sat on her bed, looking at Sumi directly. "And now you're here. Which means exams, fest, normal life. Which means you get to breathe for a while."

Sumi wanted to believe it. But the hills were still with her, pressing against her chest, making even breathing feel complicated.

****

Sunil saw her first.

He was sitting on the low wall near the physics block with Nobin and Manu, half-listening to some story about Nobin's disastrous attempt to learn his cousin's bike during Onam. But the moment he spotted Sumi walking across the quadrangle with Priya, the story disappeared. Everything disappeared except her.

She looked tired. That was his first thought. It wasn't only her body that was tired. It was in the slight slope of her shoulders, the way she

walked without looking at anything in particular, the careful blankness she'd put on her face.

He stood up too quickly, almost tripping over his own feet. Nobin said something teasing behind him, but Sunil didn't hear it. He was already walking toward her.

"Sumi," he said.

She looked up, and for a second her face did something complicated — relief mixed with something else he couldn't name. Then she smiled, small and careful.

"Hi."

Priya, reading the moment with her usual precision, gave Sumi a quick look that said I'll catch you later and continued toward the hostel.

Sunil rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly unsure what to say. He'd practiced this conversation a hundred times during Onam — what he'd tell her, how he'd ask about the silence, whether he'd mention the worry that had kept him awake too many nights. But now, looking at her actually standing there, all the rehearsed words felt wrong.

"You didn't reply much during the holidays," he said finally. The words came out softer than he'd intended, without the accusation he'd been afraid might leak through.

"I know." Sumi's voice was quiet. "Things were… complicated at home. I tried calling a few times. Amma was always around, or Papa was in the next room, and I didn't want to explain everything over the phone. Didn't know how to."

Sunil nodded, but the hurt lingered — not sharp anymore, but a steady, low-frequency hum. It was a dull ache that had built up over days of silence, of the hollow dial tone that followed the risks he'd taken just to hear her breathe, leaving him to wonder if she was truly in trouble or simply pulling away into the mist.

"I kept thinking maybe I did something wrong," he admitted. "Said something stupid before you left, or pushed too hard about the fashion parade, or — "

Sumi reached out, her fingers — still carrying the faint, sharp scent of cardamom — brushing against the sleeve of his shirt. "You didn't," she interrupted, looking at him properly now. "Sunil, you didn't do anything wrong. It was just... everything else. The police, the workers leaving, watching Papa fight something I couldn't help with. I couldn't be here and there at the same time." She paused, the weight of Thopramkudy visible in the slump of her shoulders, and then added softly, "I'm sorry I made you worry."

"Okay," he said. "That's enough for now."

They stood there a moment longer, the campus noise washing around them — students laughing, someone's bike backfiring near the gate, the canteen radio playing an old Malayalam film song. The world continuing its ordinary rhythm while they found their way back to each other.

Then Sunil smiled — the shy, lopsided one that made the corner of his eyes crinkle.

"Fashion parade practice starts tomorrow," he said. "You ready? Decided on what to wear?

Sumi hesitated only a second. She thought about her father's words before she left. Focus on your studies. Don't worry about things here. Thought about how walking on stage with Sunil would make them visible in a way she'd been careful to avoid. Thought about village gossip and her mother's questions and all the reasons to say no.

Then she thought about Sunil, about the way he was looking at her now like she was the only person on a crowded campus, about the way she'd avoided, even though unintentionally, Sunil during the holidays.

"Yes," she said. "Prepared."

****

The first week back was a humid blur, the sharp "Onam rains" having given way to a heat that turned the physics lab into a furnace of dust and sun-baked rubber tubes. Teachers' voices drone-like and persistent, carried the usual litany of incomplete records and pending assignments, but the students were already elsewhere, their minds drifting toward the end of the month.

Underneath the grumbling about textbooks barely cracked during the break, a different current took hold. The college fest was no longer a distant date on a notice board; it was a physical presence that had begun to consume the campus.

The auditorium, usually a cavern of stale air and unused props, had become the epicentre of the shift. After four, when the sun lost its "afternoon fury," the space transformed. The stage gleamed under fresh paint, its platform framed by the bright, temporary beauty of marigold strings and the heavy, sweet scent of jasmine garlands brought far too early.

Practice sessions were a chaotic theatre of nerves. Music, a jarring mix of traditional beats and film songs, competed with the rhythmic thud of feet learning their marks for the traditional fashion parade. Girls clustered in the wings, their faces flickering in the glow of small hand mirrors as they adjusted sarees with practiced hands. Beside them, the boys stood as awkward sentinels, trying to mask their discomfort behind a bravado that failed them the moment they stepped onto the boards, their hands suddenly feeling like foreign objects they didn't know how to stow.

This was the "High Range" energy returning — a frantic, fragrant countdown where the only thing anyone cared to discuss was the geography of the stage: who'd be walking with whom, and who, at the very last second, had let their courage fail them.

Sunil and Sumi had their first practice together on the second day.

They were supposed to walk the length of the stage, pause at centre, turn, and walk back — simple in theory, complicated in execution

when you were hyperaware of every step, every movement, every eye watching.

"Don't look down," the coordinator called out. "Walk like you own the stage."

Easier said than done. Sumi's saree kept getting caught under her foot. Sunil's mundu threatened to come loose. They practiced the pause-and-turn ten times before getting it even halfway smooth.

"You're too stiff," Priya said from the front row, where she sat with her notebook making notes for the organizing committee. "Relax. You're supposed to look like a couple, not like you're being forced to walk together at gunpoint."

Sunil laughed despite his nervousness. Sumi's cheeks flushed, but she smiled too.

They tried again. This time, when they paused at centre stage, Sunil glanced at Sumi and she glanced back, and something shifted — the awkwardness dissolving into something easier, more natural. They turned together, walked back, and the coordinator actually clapped.

"Better! Like that. Keep that energy."

Afterward, they sat on the auditorium steps while the next couple practiced, drinking water from bottles that had gone warm in the afternoon heat.

"We're really doing this," Sumi said, half to herself.

"Having second thoughts?"

"No. Just... thinking about what it means. Walking out there in front of everyone. Making it public."

Sunil was quiet for a moment. "We don't have to, you know. If it's too much — "

"I want to," Sumi interrupted. "I'm just aware of what it means. People will talk. It'll reach Thopramkudy eventually. Everything reaches there."

"And then?"

"Then we deal with it." She looked at him. "Together."

The word hung between them longer than either of them wanted it to.

****

Their first real fight, if it could even be called that, erupted on the third day of practice under the ancient banyan tree. Sunil had arrived early, a sentry at their usual meeting spot, clutching two glasses of tea from the canteen. The glass was hot enough to sting his palms, but the physical pain was a welcome distraction from the growing knot in his chest.

Five o'clock drifted into five-thirty. When Sumi finally emerged from the chemistry block, she looked like someone caught between two lives. Her hair was still damp from a hurried post-lab wash, and her salwar bore the dark, wet patches of a rushed drying. She moved with a distracted, heavy energy that didn't belong in the light hearted atmosphere of a college festival.

"Sorry," she said, her voice stripped of its usual warmth as she took the tea. "The lab went on longer than expected."

The tea was lukewarm now, its syrupy sweetness turning heavy, much like Sunil's mood. "You could have informed through someone," he said, trying to keep the hurt from sharpening his voice.

"I forgot. I was busy, and the professor wouldn't let us leave until the experiment was finished," she replied, her gaze flickering toward the chemistry block as if the "High Range" weight she carried had manifested in her lab work.

Sunil looked at her, really looked, seeing the new lines of exhaustion that Onam week had etched around her eyes. "You've been forgetting a lot lately," he observed quietly.

Sumi's eyes flashed with a defensive fire, a spark of the "badass" armour she usually wore to keep the world at bay. "Sunil, I told you. Things

are not normal at home. I'm trying to be here, trying to focus on this, on the practice, on us, but it's not that simple."

"I know," he said, the word landing like a peace offering. "I'm not angry. I'm just... worried. You're here, but sometimes it feels like you're not really here. Like part of you is still back there, caught in those hills."

The silence that followed was heavier than any argument. Eighty kilometres had never felt so much like an internal border.

The sounds of practice drifted from the auditorium — drums beating, someone laughing, the coordinator's voice calling out instructions.

Sunil reached out, touched her wrist lightly. The contact was brief, barely a second, but enough to say what words couldn't.

Sumi's shoulders relaxed. She stepped closer, not quite touching but near enough that he could smell the jasmine oil in her damp hair, could see the small worry line between her eyebrows that hadn't been there before Onam.

"I missed you too," she said quietly. "And I'm sorry I'm scattered. I'm trying to be better at being here."

"Don't be sorry. Just... let me help carry some of it. Whatever you're comfortable sharing."

They walked to practice together after that, the small fight already dissolving like mist in afternoon sun. Their hands brushed once or twice as they walked, not quite holding but close enough to feel the warmth.

****

Giri was having a different kind of difficulty.

He'd seen Sumi on the first day back, spotted her in the corridor outside the physics lab, talking to Priya about something. She'd smiled politely when their eyes met, the same small smile she gave everyone.

He'd tried to smile back, to say something casual, but the words stuck in his throat like stones.

He avoided her. Not obviously, not rudely, but whenever he saw her approaching in a corridor, he'd find a reason to turn the other way. When she was at practice, he'd make sure to arrive late or leave early. He threw himself into fest organizing work, into union responsibilities, into anything that kept him too busy to think about how easily he'd been played.

Priya noticed immediately.

During a practice break, while Sumi was helping with costume pins and Sunil was running through the walk with another couple, Priya pulled Giri aside near the water cooler at the back of the auditorium.

"You're avoiding her," she said without preamble. Her voice was quiet but firm.

Giri looked away, focusing on the water dispenser like it required intense concentration. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything about the march," Priya replied. "Just say hello. She's not her father. She's not responsible for what happened."

Giri rubbed his face with both hands, the gesture carrying exhaustion that went beyond physical tiredness. "I know. But I feel like an idiot. I stood there with a megaphone, Priya. Shouting about exploitation and workers' rights. And the whole time, I was helping the actual villain. Everyone used me and that against Luckachen Uncle."

Priya's voice softened. "Then learn from it. Use it to be smarter next time. But don't punish Sumi for your mistakes. She didn't ask for any of this."

Sunil, passing by with a water bottle, overheard the last part. He stopped, glanced at Giri, then at Priya, his expression thoughtful.

"You know," he said lightly, "for someone who claims not to care about Giri, you're very invested in his emotional state."

Priya's cheeks flushed. "Someone has to watch him. He clearly can't watch himself."

Giri gave a small, rueful smile despite himself. "She's not wrong."

The moment broke some of the tension.

****

The days leading up to the fest blurred together in a rush of final preparations.

The auditorium smelled of fresh paint and flowers. The stage crew worked late into the evenings, stringing lights and testing sound systems. The cultural committee ran around with clipboards and stressed expressions, managing last-minute changes and participant cancellations.

The traditional fashion parade began with the slow beat of chenda and the high notes of elathalam.

The first couple walked out to applause — silk saree and gold jewellery, classical mundu and traditional dignity. They moved slowly, gracefully, the girl's hands moving in small gestures that suggested mudras without performing them fully.

Couple after couple followed. Each different — bright reds and deep blues, temple gold and simple elegance, some walking with perfect synchronization, others slightly awkward but endearing.

Then the announcer called: "Sunil and Sumi!"

The auditorium erupted before they even appeared.

Sumi stepped onto the stage first, and the lights hit her like a physical thing. The cream saree caught every spotlight, the gold border blazing. The jasmine garlands — still slightly damp, smelling of morning and promise — draped across her shoulder and down her arm. Her hair was coiled with fresh flowers, kohl lining her eyes, the traditional look complete.

But it was her expression that caught people — not the practiced smile of someone performing, but something quieter. More real. A kind of dignity that came from carrying weight invisibly.

Sunil appeared beside her, white mundu and shirt crisp despite his earlier mad dash. He looked at her once, just once, and something passed between them. An understanding. A promise.

They walked.

The auditorium exploded.

The roar was deafening — claps like thunder, whistles piercing the air, voices screaming "Sunil-Sumi!" and "Best couple!" The noise rolled over them in waves. Phones came up, flashes going off like lightning. Friends stood on seats in the back rows, screaming encouragement. Even the chief guests were clapping — Nivin smiling broadly, the ADGP nodding in what might have been approval.

They reached centre stage, and paused. Sumi glanced at Sunil. He gave her the smallest nod — the same one they'd shared at the hostel gate months ago, the same one that meant I'm here, you're here, we're okay.

The crowd went absolutely wild.

They turned together, walked back, and the applause followed them all the way off the stage.

****

Giri stood at the back of the auditorium. He wasn't watching the stage; he was looking at Priya, who was coordinating the light cues from the wings. She looked exhausted, her hair messy, a clipboard clutched to her chest.

For a moment, the "General Secretary" persona slipped. He wanted to go to her, to take the clipboard away and tell her she didn't have to carry the whole festival on her shoulders. But then, a local party elder leaned in, whispering about a "follow-up" to the Thopramkudy protest.

Giri's eyes flicked back to the elder, the hunger for the "big world" winning out over the quiet need of the "small" one.

Priya saw the exchange from across the room. She didn't wave. She just tightened her grip on the clipboard and turned back to the lights. She was the radar, and she had just seen the storm moving further away from the shore.

****

Backstage afterward was pandemonium — everyone laughing, hugging, taking selfies, high on adrenaline and success. Sumi touched Sunil's arm briefly.

"Thank you," she said softly, the words almost lost in the noise. "For the garlands. For everything."

He shrugged, still breathing hard. "Couldn't let you walk without flowers."

Priya appeared, hugging Sumi fiercely. "You were amazing. Both of you."

She glanced at Giri, who stood nearby, watching her with an expression she couldn't quite read.

When the group walked back toward the hostel later — the fest still going, music and laughter echoing across campus — Giri fell into step beside Priya. Their arms brushed. She felt the warmth of it, the brief contact that meant more than it should.

But once they reached the hostel gate, he stepped back. Said goodnight to everyone. Left without lingering, without the long looks that used to stretch between them.

Priya watched him go, the doubt heavier than ever.

****

Inside the hostel, she and Sumi collapsed on their beds, exhausted and wired at the same time.

"You were perfect out there," Priya said to the ceiling.

"I was terrified," Sumi admitted. "But also... it felt right. Like I was choosing something. Making it real."

"It is real. Everyone saw it. By tomorrow, all of Erattupetta will know. Probably Thopramkudy too."

Sumi was quiet for a moment. Then: "I know. And I'm ready for that."

She lifted the jasmine garland from her hair — still fresh despite the heat of the stage lights, still fragrant. She held it to her cheek, feeling the cool petals against her skin, smelling the sweetness that reminded her of home, of her mother's hands arranging flowers for the pookalam, of her father's rare smile when she'd suggested the cooperative.

Home felt very close and very far at the same time.

She placed the garland carefully on the small table beside her bed, where the scent would fill the room through the night.

Outside the window, the campus was still alive with festival sounds — music and laughter and the particular joy of students celebrating something beautiful they'd created together.

But in the quiet of the room, Sumi felt the sweetness of the day and the shadows of the hills meet, tangle, and refuse to let go.

****

In Poonjar, late that evening, Sunil's father called him into the living room.

A thick packet lay on the table — study materials for bank probationary officer exams. Books with titles like "Quantitative Aptitude" and "General Awareness" that looked intimidating and official.

"Physics is fine for college," his father said, half-serious, half-teasing. "But for a career? You need something steady. A bank job, government service, something with a future."

Sunil stared at the books, then at his father.

"Or," his father added with a grin, "you could always learn rubber tapping. I'm getting old. Our small plantations will need someone, if you are ready for that."

"Achan — "

"On a lighter note," his father continued, eyes twinkling, "Dayana showed me photographs of the fashion parade. Said you and that Sumi girl made quite the pair. So, I'm thinking — a bank manager looks better than a rubber tapper to future in-laws, no?"

Sunil's face went hot. "Achan, it's not like that — "

"No? Why do you check your phone every five minutes? Why does Dayana say you haven't stopped smiling since college reopened?"

Sunil grabbed the books, mumbling something about studying, and retreated to his room while his father's laughter followed him.

Later, lying in bed, he thought about Sumi on the stage, stunning and strong, smiling only at him. Thought about the jasmine garlands and the roar of the crowd and the way she'd said thank you like it meant more than flowers.

And he thought about the shadows she carried from the hills, the weight he couldn't fully understand but wanted to help bear anyway.

He fell asleep with his phone on his chest, waiting for a text that came just before midnight:

Thank you for today. For everything. Sleep well.

He smiled in the dark and typed back: Always. Goodnight.

The word hung between them across the distance — simple, weighted, full of promises neither could quite name yet.

But real enough to build on. Real enough to fight for when the time came.

Sunil fell asleep with the scent of jasmine still on his hands and the secret he hadn’t told anyone yet. He didn't know that miles away, a man was sitting in a silent office, his chest rattling with a cough he couldn't stop, looking at the same moon and wondering if his daughter’s 'choice' would be enough to save her from the darkness he was fighting.

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11
The Slow Turning

November-December 1999

The whispers started in the dark corners of labour camps, spreading faster than mist through the valleys.

"It was one of Ittichen's men who gave the bottle."

"Raju was drunk, yes, but someone waited for him at the stone face."

"They wanted to frighten Luckachen," another added. "Make him sell."

The words moved through the Bihar and Jharkhand workers like fever — first in Luckachen's camp, then into Ittichen's larger, more crowded barracks. What began as suspicion hardened into certainty. The feeling in Ittichen's camp was changing. It wasn't just fear anymore. It was anger.

The first open quarrel broke out on a Thursday evening.

Varghese, Ittichen's foreman for fifteen years, was trying to get the men to load granite blocks early for the next morning's transport. A young worker from Bihar dropped a steel tray with a clatter that echoed off the tin-roofed barracks.

"Careful, you fool!" Varghese snapped.

The boy looked up slowly. "Careful? Like Raju was careful? Like the one who gave him the bottle was careful?"

The other workers stopped. Hands stilled on granite blocks. Conversations died mid-sentence.

Varghese's face darkened. "Watch your mouth, boy."

An older worker stepped forward — maybe forty, quieter than the others. "We all know who sent the bottle. We all know who waited and what happened in the dark."

Varghese raised his hand to strike. Before the blow could land, three other men moved between them — not aggressive, just there, solid as the granite they'd been loading.

But no one threw a punch.

Not that night.

Varghese lowered his hand slowly. "Get back to work. All of you."

They did. But the work was slower, the movements deliberate. And when the foreman turned his back, the looks exchanged between the workers said everything.

The next morning, four beds in Ittichen's camp were empty.

By the weekend, twelve more workers had left, some heading back to their villages with whatever advance wages they could beg, others simply walking to the bus stand with nothing but a plastic bag and the clothes on their backs.

They had no financial cushion at home. The money they sent every month kept their families fed, their children in school. Leaving meant hunger. Meant shame.

But fear had become heavier than hunger.

A few tried finding work at neighbouring estates. Every gate was closed. Word had spread: "Don't hire troublemakers. "Anyone who speaks against Ittichen Chettan doesn't work in Thopramkudy."

The remaining workers in Luckachen's camp watched the exodus with grim understanding. They knew the same could happen to them if they spoke too loudly.

But they also knew something else.

Luckachen had not turned his back.

When Luckachen heard that the workers were standing up to Ittichen, he felt a tickle in his chest. He turned away and coughed quietly into his hand. The same metallic taste was there, but this time, he didn't mind it. His body was weak, but his heart felt light. The truth was finally coming out. He wiped his mouth and stood up straight. He could not fall yet. Not when the finish line was in sight.

****

The morning after the worst of the walkouts, Mattaikochu brought Rakesh, Luckachen's Bihar foreman, to the lawyer's office in Kottayam.

They'd left before dawn. Rakesh sat in the back seat, a plastic folder clutched in his hands, his face nervous, determined, afraid.

The lawyer, Advocate Cherian, an old friend of Luckachen's from army days, listened to Rakesh's statement for ninety minutes. The statement was detailed: the bottle handed through the camp fence by a man from Ittichen's quarry crew, the fight between Raju and Shankar over the cook Lakshmi, Raju storming off drunk and angry into the darkness.

When the statement was complete, Advocate Cherian read it back slowly in Hindi.

"You understand this will be submitted to the police? That you may be called to testify in court?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you're willing to stand by it? Under oath?"

Rakesh hesitated. "I have a mother and two sisters in Bihar. If Ittichen finds out... they have no one else, but I have to do this, for my brother. I brought him to Thopramkudy."

Mattaikochu handed the phone to Rakesh. Luckachen's voice came through clear and firm.

"You are my man; you and your family are my responsibility, but I will not force you to sign. It's up to you."

Silence for a while. Luckachen continued, "We have to get justice for Raju, and you know what happened and why it happened."

Rakesh's hand trembled. "Sahib... I don't know what to say."

"Whatever you do, that's your decision. The rest I will handle."

Rakesh nodded. The affidavit was notarized that afternoon — three copies made, each one stamped and signed.

One copy stayed with the lawyer. One went to Fr. Mathew for safekeeping. And one was delivered to the police station before sunset.

****

The response came within forty-eight hours.

A police jeep arrived at Ittichen's camp on Saturday morning. Two constables and SI Mathew stepped out, arrest warrant in hand.

The man named in Rakesh's statement, Biju, a quarry supervisor, was eating breakfast when they found him. He looked at the warrant. Looked at the handcuffs.

He did not resist.

He simply stood, walked to the jeep, and climbed into the back seat with the careful movements of a man who'd been expecting this.

As the jeep pulled away, workers lined the road to watch. Some faces showed satisfaction. Others showed fear.

But most showed nothing at all.

****

Ittichen's response was swift but not loud.

That evening, two of his men appeared at Mattaikochu's house. They stood outside the gate in the gathering darkness.

"Where is Rakesh?" one asked.

"Not here," Mattaikochu replied.

The second man spat betel juice on the ground. "Tell Luckachen we want to talk to him. Man to man."

Mattaikochu smiled thinly. "If Luckachen wants to talk to you, he will come himself. Until then, stay away from my gate."

They left without another word.

But they came back the next night. And the night after that.

Always after dark. Always the same question. Always the same answer.

They never crossed the gate. Never raised their voices.

They didn't need to.

Mattaikochu's wife stopped going to the market alone. Their son started walking home from school with friends. The small normalcies of life contracted, became careful.

But Mattaikochu did not waver.

Other troubles appeared across Luckachen's estate — subtle, deniable, constant.

A water pump cracked, flooding overnight. A worker's bicycle had both tires slashed. The cook found a dead rat in the rice storage bin.

None of it was conclusive. But everyone knew.

Ittichen was applying pressure — not through open confrontation, but through steady erosion of security.

****

In the sub-jail at Pala, Biju sat in a cell that smelled of sweat and disinfectant and despair.

On the fourth day, an advocate arrived.

Smooth. Expensive watch. Leather folder. The confidence of a lawyer who'd won his cases on money power rather than on the merit of arguments.

"I'm here to help you," he began.

Biju said nothing.

"The situation is unfortunate. A man is dead. Someone must be held responsible." The advocate spoke as if reciting a familiar script. "But responsibility can take many forms. And the consequences… those can be managed."

He pulled out a photograph. Biju's wife and young daughter, both smiling.

"Beautiful family. Your wife wrote about your daughter's birthday? About school fees?"

Biju's jaw tightened.

"Here's what I'm authorized to offer. The investigation shows you were present. You had access. You provided the bottle that led to the incident. These are facts that can't be disputed."

He paused, letting the weight settle.

"You admit to giving Raju the bottle. You admit the fight escalated because of your anger over the woman — the camp cook. These things happened. Tragic, but human. You followed him that night. Things got physical. He fell. You panicked."

The advocate pulled out a typed statement.

"In exchange — ten lakh rupees transferred to your wife's account. Direct bank transfer, completely legal. That's more money than you'll earn in your entire working life. Your daughter's education, covered. A small house, yours. A shop for your wife, established. Your family will never struggle again."

The room was silent except for the ceiling fan's rotation.

The advocate placed his pen on the paper.

"Think about your wife opening that bank message. Think about your daughter never asking why there's no money for books. All you have to do is sign this statement."

He sat back.

"Think about it overnight. I'll return tomorrow. But this offer expires soon. Once the charge-sheet is filed without your cooperation, the opportunity is gone. And then you face the full might of the law alone – no help, no support, nothing for your family to fall back on."

He stood, leaving the photograph and pen.

"Tomorrow. Give me your answer tomorrow."

After he left, Biju sat alone, staring at his wife and daughter.

Ten lakh rupees.

His hand still rested on the pen.

That night, while his cellmates snored, Biju lay awake staring at the ceiling. He thought about truth and lies and the space between them. About his daughter asking someday: "Papa, why were you in jail?" About money, and what it could buy, and what it couldn't.

By morning, he still hadn't decided.

When the advocate returned, Biju looked at him for a long moment.

"I need more time to think."

The advocate's smile tightened. "Time is running out."

"Then let it run."

"Three days. After that, the offer disappears and you face this alone."

After he left, Biju sat with the unsigned papers and the photograph of his family.

Caught between truth and survival. Between what he'd done and what they wanted him to confess to. The decision hung there, unmade, as heavy as the bars on the window.

****

The case dragged with grinding inevitability.

The charge-sheet, when it came, named Biju as primary accused — murder under the influence, criminal conspiracy.

Luckachen read the charge-sheet at his desk, noting what was absent: Ittichen's name, anywhere.

The MLA issued a statement praising the "swift action" and "commitment to justice for migrant workers."

The case was committed to sessions court. A trial date was set for January. Then postponed to March. Then postponed again.

The file began its slow journey — open, unresolved, one more case waiting for a justice system that moved like molasses.

****

The truth reached Giri not in a single revelation, but in jagged fragments that refused to fit together comfortably. A cousin at the Pala court whispered about a supervisor being bribed to confess; a union friend mentioned the foreman now lived under Luckachen's roof — real protection, not just political slogans.

Piece by piece, the march Giri had led with such starched-shirt conviction began to look hollow. He had let his hunger for justice be aimed at the wrong target, while the real enemy remained untouched in a glass farmhouse across the valley.

The shame was a stone in his chest. He avoided Sumi for days, turning down corridors to escape her gaze, until Priya's words finally eroded his cowardice: "She's not her father. She's not responsible for what happened."

He found her the next day by the physics block, her textbook open but her mind clearly eighty kilometres away in the mist.

"Congratulations on the parade," he said, the lie about being 'busy' tasting like ash.

Sumi studied him with a quiet, unsettling perception. "You've been quiet, Giri. Is it because of my father?"

"I was used," he admitted, the directness of her gaze forcing the truth out. "I was fighting the wrong fight."

A small, weary smile touched her lips — the same measured strength he'd seen in Luckachen. "You're allowed to be wrong, Giri. As long as you're willing to learn." As she walked away, the isolation lifted, but the weight of his error remained.

Forgiveness at college was one thing; the High Range was another.

That Sunday, Giri took the bus to Thopramkudy, moving through the market like a ghost, trying to understand the geography of his mistake.

Next day at Thopramkudy, Giri retreated to the dim, paper-strewn confines of the party youth office. The megaphone that had once defined his presence now sat silent, buried under a stack of fading manifestos. In the corners of the office, the broad-stroked banners from his march gathered dust alongside hundreds of others from previous agitations. Staring at them, he began to wonder about the real truth of all those organised rages; were they all merely planned and executed with specific agendas by the "who's who" of society, while boys like him were just the muscle for the script?

Seeking penance, he spent his time at office as a volunteer clerk instead of a leader at party meetings or functions. He sat in self-imposed exile behind a desk, the dry friction of ledger entries replacing the adrenaline of slogans as he cross-referenced agricultural loan applications for the elderly farmers who shuffled through the door.

He was no longer the 'hero' seeking a spotlight; he was a student of the system he had nearly broken. In the silence of that office, he learned that leadership was not about being loud, but about being reliable. It was then at the party office, that he made his final decision: he would never again be a weapon in another man's war; he would be a shield for the people he served.

The next Saturday morning he was at the butcher's counter when the olive-green Jeep pulled up.

Through the open window, Luckachen's eyes met his. There was no nod of recognition, no flash of the pride Luckachen had once felt watching the young leader from his veranda. It was a long, level look — the kind that sees the weapon and the hand that holds it. Giri felt the air leave his lungs and retreated into the crowd without looking back.

Behind him, Luckachen watched until the young man disappeared into the mist.

The small smile from the march day was gone. In its place was something harder. More measured. The look of a man who understood how easily good intentions could be weaponised.

He did not call out.

Simply watched. And waited.

****

The mediator came again the following week.

Sebastian Chettan arrived at dusk, carrying only his walking stick. Luckachen gestured to the chair.

"Ittichen Chettan sends his respects," the old headmaster began. "He regrets the misunderstandings. He asks that you consider letting the matter rest. The boy has been arrested, the case is moving toward resolution. Let everyone move on."

Luckachen looked at the ridge where Ittichen's lights burned. "I have lost workers. Good men who left in fear. I have lost trust in a system that protects the powerful instead of the weak. And you ask me to let it rest?"

"Sometimes letting go is the only way to keep what matters."

"If I accept that truth doesn't matter as long as everyone moves on, then what slips next? My land? My workers' safety? My daughter's future?"

Sebastian Chettan sighed. "I will tell him you heard his words."

"Tell him my answer is to let the law take its course. Whatever that course may be."

****

Fr Mathew arrived in the evening, taking the same shortcut through the cardamom rows he'd walked for years.

"I heard about the offer that was made," the priest said. "The man caught between his family's needs and his conscience."

"I'm tired," Luckachen said. "Tired of watching the system bend to accommodate power while crushing everyone else."

Fr Mathew placed his hand on Luckachen's arm. "Truth has its own timing. Sometimes it takes years. Sometimes it never fully emerges in this life. But God sees. Until then, you do what you can control. Protect Rakesh. Build the cooperative. Document everything. Create alternatives to Ittichen's version of how the hills should work."

He paused. "You know what's interesting about the hills? They change slowly. Rain and wind and time reshape them, but you can't see it happening day-to-day. Only when you look back over years do you realize how different they've become. Truth works the same way."

Luckachen nodded slowly. "The cooperative is growing. Eighteen families now. Government recognition for the organic initiative is coming. Documentation is solid. I'm not just fighting Ittichen anymore. I'm building something that will outlast him."

"Good. That's the fight worth fighting. Make that land matter to too many people for Ittichen to take it without everyone noticing."

They sat until darkness settled. Fr Mathew made the sign of the cross. "Don't lose sight of what you're really fighting for. Not revenge. Not

even justice for Raju, though that matters. You're fighting for a version of these hills where your daughter can live without fear. Keep that vision clear."

After the priest left, Luckachen went inside.

The house was warm, smelling of rice and fish curry. Ancy looked up. "Everything okay?"

"Everything is as it should be," he replied.

Which wasn't the same as fine. But it was true.

****

Sumi came home for a weekend in early November.

She helped her mother in the kitchen, working in comfortable silence. But she noticed things — the way Ancy's hands moved too quickly, the way she glanced toward the window when vehicles passed.

After dinner, they sat together in the front room.

"How are exams?" Luckachen asked.

"Fine. Physics is harder, but manageable."

"The cooperative is doing well," Luckachen said. "Twenty families now. We're expanding the cardamom plots. Your idea, making the land valuable for cultivation rather than extraction. It's working."

Sumi looked up with genuine interest. "Twenty families? That's good growth."

Ancy brought more tea. She didn't stay in the kitchen this time. She sat down at the table with Luckachen and Sumi.

"How is the case?" Sumi asked quietly.

"Proceeding. The man they arrested is being offered money to confess to everything. It's a terrible choice — his family's security or his integrity."

"But you protected the witness. Rakesh is safe."

"For now. The pressure won't stop. Ittichen is patient. He'll keep applying it in small ways until something breaks."

"Then we need to be more patient," Sumi said simply. "More stubborn. Build the cooperative. Document everything. Make the alternative too strong to break."

"We will face this together," Ancy said. Her voice was quiet but firm.

Sumi reached out and touched her mother's hand, then her father's. Three different people, but one single purpose. They weren't just protecting a piece of land anymore. They were protecting each other.

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12
The Degree of Distance

April 2002

The three years of college blurred like a fast-moving landscape seen from a train window, until suddenly the seasons stopped at March 2002. The cusp of the final university exams, where every hour felt like a clock about to strike.

The campus transformed overnight. The canteen that had once buzzed with laughter now held only scattered students bent over textbooks, tea cooling forgotten in steel tumblers. The banyan tree's shade sheltered solitary figures instead of groups. Even the hostel corridors felt muted, footsteps hurried, doors closed softly, as if everyone understood that time had suddenly become expensive.

Most girls, including Sumi and Priya, stayed back during the one-month study leave, few went home where family questions and distractions would make concentration impossible.

Sumi and Priya maintained the rhythm they'd perfected over three years: wake at 5:30, quick bath, black coffee from the common pantry, books open by six. The table between their beds held neatly stacked notes, previous years' question papers, highlighters in different colours, and two water bottles that never quite stayed cold.

Practical and final lab examinations filled the first two weeks. The first two weeks blurred into a haze of lab exams, the chemistry lab's sharp scent of reagents, the physics lab's tense silence broken only by the clink of apparatus. Sumi walked out of her last viva with surprising calm, her answers steady, her usual post-exam panic absent.

At home, Sunil had transformed his hostel room into a study fortress. Physics textbooks covered the desk. A timetable was stuck on the wall.

But beside the university material sat something new — bank PO preparatory books, their pages already dog-eared from repeated study.

He'd started preparing almost by accident, one evening when worry about the future became too loud to ignore. A good job would give him confidence to face Luckachen someday. A salary slip wasn't love, but it was proof of seriousness. Proof he could provide, could be responsible for someone beyond himself.

Sumi called from the hostel PCO whenever the long queue and the warden's watchful eye allowed, usually during the narrow window allotted for "home calls." These were hurried, breathless conversations — brief exchanges about exam preparations, hostel food, and small trivial things – barely enough to keep them tethered, but enough.

During their last call, her voice had carried a new, decisive edge, stripped of its usual High Range hesitation. "Focus on your studies, Sunil," she'd whispered, the sound of other girls' chatter humming in the background. "Let's meet this Friday at church, right after the Holy Mass"

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Giri fought his own quiet battle.

Failed first and second-year papers, low marks from too many party meetings, too many rallies, too much time chasing something larger than textbooks. Now he was rewriting those papers during final semester, sitting with material he'd barely opened the first time.

The irony wasn't lost on him: the man who'd lectured others about changing society was struggling to pass his own exams.

"I cleared them," he told Priya during one evening phone call. "All the backlogs. Barely, but passed. I am trying to be present rather than just visible."

The conversation between Giri and Priya shifted, the air on the line crackling with a new, quiet intimacy as they moved from his academic redemption to her looming departure.

"I'm proud of you," Priya said, genuine warmth in her voice. She continued softly, "Keep trying, I'm still here." There was a pause, a shared breath across the distance, before she added, "I have some news of my own. I went to the post office today."

The scholarship interview at the Institute of Physics, Bhubaneswar, had gone well, far better than she had dared to hope. The panel had been visibly impressed with her research proposal on condensed matter physics — the technical depth, yes, but more than that, the quiet stubbornness that kept showing through her nervousness.

"The provisional selection letter arrived," she told him, her voice steadying as she spoke the words aloud for the first time. She didn't mention that she kept the physical letter tucked inside her heaviest textbook. Ms. Priya is provisionally selected for the Integrated PhD program...

"Bhubaneswar?" Giri's voice was small, and she felt the distance — a realization she wasn't ready for, of just how far away he actually was.

"It's a long way from Erattupetta," she admitted. "I told Sumi this morning. She was happy for me, but she asked something that I haven't been able to answer." Priya's voice dropped, the "radar" of her intuition picking up the static in her own heart. "She looked at me and asked if I was tired or if I was troubled. She wanted to know the difference between the exhaustion of final exams and the kind that comes from thinking too much, too often, about someone who is always leaving for a rally."

Giri was silent. The irony of his situation bit deeper now; he was finally becoming "present" just as she was preparing to become a memory.

"I didn't know what to tell her," Priya continued, looking at the faded phone booth walls. "Because I'm still trying to figure out if the silence between us is a bridge or a gatekeeper."

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In Thopramkudy, the silence of the house was increasingly punctuated by Ancy's growing intuition. She watched Sumi during her weekend visits — the way she hovered near the landline only to retreat at the sound of a footstep, or how she abruptly returned the receiver to its cradle the moment Ancy entered the room. It was a nervous, split-world energy that Ancy recognized from her own youth, back when Luckachen was courting her before the families had made it official.

One evening, as Luckachen sat in his usual chair by the window with the newspaper, Ancy finally spoke. Her hands, folding a saree with mechanical precision, suddenly stilled.

"I think Sumi is in a relationship," she said, her voice carrying the deep maternal fear of a future losing its coordinate. "Someone has gotten into her heart. The moment we come near the phone; she goes silent."

Luckachen lowered his paper slowly, his fingers drumming the armrest — a habit of tactical consideration from his army days. "College life... such things are normal," he said, though his voice was more measured than certain. "If she is not telling us, perhaps she is waiting for the right time. We must trust the woman she is becoming, the one who thought of the cooperative."

Ancy looked at him, her gaze sharpening. "A half-hearted choice is just another name for a mistake. If she chooses a path, I want her to walk it with her head held high, not in these shadows."

"She is stronger than we think," Luckachen replied, though he did not return to his reading.

That night, they lay awake in the dark with their separate weights.

Ancy dreamed of a traditional Thopramkudy wedding, blessed by the church and witnessed by the community — the same security she had known.

For Luckachen, a small voice, the voice of a father rather than a strategist, whispered: "What if the truth is something you are not ready to hear?"

He pushed the thought away and focused on more immediate concerns — the cooperative, the case, the land that needed protecting.

One objective at a time. That's how battles were won.

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The final days passed in a blur of revision, last-minute panic, whispered prayers outside exam halls, and the strange hollow feeling that comes at the end of something significant.

On the last evening before the campus emptied for summer, the four of them met under the banyan tree, Sumi, Priya, Sunil, and Giri.

The same tree where they'd sat after the election victory, where they'd planned the fashion parade, where so many of their stories had unfolded in the shade of its spreading branches.

They sat on the low wall, sharing banana chips that Priya had bought from the canteen. The packets crinkled in the quiet evening. Somewhere, a cricket started its song.

No one wanted to acknowledge what they all knew, that this was likely the last time the four of them would sit here like this, before life scattered them in different directions.

Priya talked about Bhubaneswar, about condensed matter physics and research proposals and the nervousness mixed with excitement of starting something completely new in a city where she knew no one. Her voice carried hope but also fear, and Giri listened with an intensity that suggested he was memorizing every word.

Giri talked about maybe getting more involved in local panchayat work, about applying the political lessons he'd learned the hard way. About trying to be the kind of leader who asked questions before choosing sides. He spoke carefully, as if testing out a new version of himself that he wasn't quite comfortable in yet.

Sunil talked about bank exams and job prospects with the careful optimism of someone trying to convince himself as much as anyone else. He mentioned the exam scheduled for July, the preparation

materials, the coaching classes he might join. He didn't look at Sumi while he spoke, but everyone understood why the job mattered.

Sumi mostly listened, adding small comments, smiling at the right moments. But her mind kept drifting — to Thopramkudy, to her father building the cooperative, to her mother's daily phone calls, to the impossible choice moving towards her, slow and certain as the monsoon rain, one she couldn't name yet.

When the conversation lulled, Priya suddenly said, "Remember that first day we all met? Physics class, first year. Giri had just joined and was trying to figure out where to sit, and Sunil was already complaining about the professor's accent."

They all laughed — the memory bright and sharp despite three years' distance.

"And you," Giri said to Priya, "you corrected the professor's equation on the board in the second class. I remember thinking, "This girl is either brilliant or fearless.'"

"Both," Sunil chimed in, grinning.

"Obviously both," Priya replied, but her smile was soft, pleased.

Sumi watched them — these three people who'd become woven into her life so completely she couldn't imagine untangling the threads. Priya, who'd shared her room and her secrets and her late-night worries. Sunil, who'd somehow become the answer to a question she hadn't known she was asking. And Giri, who'd learned to be wrong and grown from it, who'd given Sunil confidence just by being his friend.

"Whatever happens," Sumi said suddenly, surprising herself, "whatever directions we go, we need to promise we won't lose this. This... us."

The words came out more emotional than she'd intended. Priya looked at her sharply, reading something underneath.

"We won't," Priya said firmly, reaching across to squeeze Sumi's hand. "Whatever happens, you have me. Always."

The way Priya said “whatever”, told Sumi she already knew something was wrong, even without details.

"Us too," Sunil said, and Giri nodded agreement.

As they sat under the banyan tree for the last time, Sumi looked at her friends and realised that even after three years, they were all still strangers in a way. We all hide behind the versions of ourselves we present to the world, keeping our true fears and desires tucked away like secrets in a locked drawer. No one truly knows anyone; we only know the stories we are told.

They sat until the darkness became complete and the first stars appeared between the banyan branches. Until the hostel lights came on and Sr. Glory’s voice carried across the compound: "Girls! Curfew in fifteen minutes!"

When they stood to leave, Priya hugged Sumi tightly, the kind of hug that already knew something was coming, and promised, without needing to say it, that she'd be there when it did.

Sunil and Giri walked the girls back to the hostel gate. The boys stood watching until the door closed behind them, until Sumi’s silhouette disappeared up the stairs.

"She’s scared," Giri said quietly.

"I know," Sunil replied.

"You really think you can pass those bank exams?"

"I have to."

Giri clapped him on the shoulder. "Then you will. You’re stubborn enough."

They walked back through the empty campus, two friends who’d grown up together, now facing futures that felt both exciting and terrifying at the same moment.

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The campus dissolved in a series of departures, the corridors that had vibrated with the energy of the festival now surrendering to a hollow silence. Buses pulled away for Kochi, Kottayam, and the high ridges of Thopramkudy, carrying the students toward a future that suddenly felt more like an obligation than a choice.

Sumi took the morning bus to the hills, her bag weighed down by textbooks that had become relics of a life she was leaving behind.

As the bus climbed, the landscape shifted from the red soil and rubber of the plains to the emerald, mist-shrouded terraces of cardamom. The air thinned, cooling as it carried the scents of her childhood — earth, rain, and the sharp, medicinal tang of the hills. But as the familiar peaks of Thopramkudy emerged from the white void, the beauty no longer offered comfort.

The hills felt less like a heritage and more like a cage, a word that rose in her mind with a heavy, complicated finality. She was returning to a place that expected one version of her — the dutiful daughter, the one who'd marry well and make everyone proud — while carrying inside herself a different version she'd only recently discovered. The one who could think strategically about cooperatives, who could fall in love with a boy from Poonjar, who could imagine futures that didn't follow the expected script.

The bus dropped her at Thopramkudy junction. Mattaikochu was waiting with the jeep, his familiar weathered face creasing into a genuine smile.

"Mole back from college!" He took her bag, handling it with the same care he showed everything belonging to Luckachen's family. "Exams finished?"

"All done."

"Good marks coming?"

"We'll see."

“Papa has a surprise for you.”

Sumi's fingers tightened on the strap of her bag. Forcing a laugh to hide her anxiety, she asked "I hope I'm not married off next week?"

"No, nothing like that, you will see once we reach home."

The drive up to the estate took fifteen minutes through roads she knew by heart. The cardamom was flowering — small white blossoms scattered through the green like stars fallen to earth. Workers in the fields looked up and waved, calling out greetings. Everything looked the same as it always had.

But Sumi felt the difference in her chest, decisions she hadn't made yet, a future about to split into different tracks, questions she'd been avoiding that demanded answers.

At the house, she saw a brand new olive-green vehicle parked at the car porch. "Is this the surprise?" she asked.

"Yes, the brand-new Mahindra Scorpio, in Papa's favourite olive-green."

Ancy was waiting on the veranda before the vehicle even came to a complete stop.

"Mole!" She pulled Sumi into a hug the moment her feet touched the ground, holding tight enough that Sumi could feel her mother's relief and worry mixed together. "You're so thin! They're not feeding you properly at that hostel, are they? I knew I should have sent more food with you."

"I'm fine, Amma. The food is adequate."

"Adequate is not the same as good." Ancy held Sumi at arm's length, studying her face with a mother's practiced eye that saw too much. "You look tired. And stressed. Were the exams very difficult?"

"No, they were manageable."

But Ancy's eyes lingered, searching for something she couldn't name, some change she could sense but not identify.

Inside, the house smelled of lunch being prepared, fish curry and rice, tapioca and thoran, all of Sumi's favourites. Luckachen was in his office, but he came out when he heard her voice, giving her the small nod that was his version of a hug — formal to outsiders but carrying affection for those who knew him.

"Exams went well?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Good." He studied her for a moment, and Sumi felt that sharp military assessment that missed nothing. But whatever he saw, he didn't comment on it. "Rest today. Tomorrow we'll talk about the cooperative. There are some new developments you should know about. Your ideas are bearing fruit."

Sumi nodded, feeling that familiar pull — being needed, being valued, being treated as a partner in something that mattered.

"Twenty-five families now," Luckachen continued, a hint of satisfaction in his voice. "The organic certification came through. We're getting premium prices. The government agriculture officer visited last week, said it's one of the best-run cooperatives he's seen in the district. Tomorrow we have a meeting, you should attend"

Pride flickered in his eyes when he looked at her. "Your idea, mole. Your vision." The words should have made her happy. They did make her happy. But they also made the weight in her chest heavier, because disappointing this man, this father who'd finally learned to trust her as an equal, felt unimaginable.

"That's wonderful, Papa."

"Rest now. Freshen up. Your mother has made all your favourites for lunch."

Sumi went to her room, the familiar space feeling both comforting and confining. She unpacked mechanically — clothes in the cupboard, books on the shelf, the small things that marked a return to childhood

even as she felt herself standing on the edge of something entirely adult.

The landline buzzed and then went off, and after a few seconds buzzed again.

Sumi rushed to the phone and picked up the receiver in a hurry.

“Hope you reached safely” the voice she was waiting for echoed from the other end. And the voice continued “Miss you already.”

Through the window, she could hear her mother in the kitchen, humming a church hymn. Could hear her father’s voice from the office, probably talking to Mattaikochu Chettan.

Finally, she replied “Yes. Safe. Can’t talk much.”

Not missing you either. Not thinking of you. Just the bare minimum that wouldn’t be a lie but wouldn’t reveal too much either. She kept the receiver back aside and looked around and a sigh of relief at not finding no one in the hall.

But everything felt different now.

She was standing at the edge of something — a choice, a future, a decision that would define everything that came after.

Sumi gripped the edge of the veranda railing, the rough wood grain biting into her palms. Below, the cardamom rows were being erased, one green terrace at a time, as the mist crawled up the ridge toward her.

In her pocket, the mobile phone let out a low, muffled vibration against her thigh — a cold, mechanical pulse that seemed to demand an answer the hills wouldn't allow.

From the kitchen, the sharp, rhythmic *thwack* of her mother’s knife against the wooden board sounded like a countdown. Every strike of the blade echoed in Sumi's throat, making the air feel like thick, wet wool.

She watched her shadow, long and distorted in the grey light, reaching out toward the gate as if trying to flee before she could stop it.

The gate was only ten paces away, but as she looked at it, her knees began to tremble with the weight of the forty-two acres pressing against her back.

And the ground beneath her feet felt less solid than it ever had before.

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Nobody at the cooperative meeting was talking and it had the particular quietness of a hall waiting for a storm. Many families had already packed their bags — the pressure from Ittichen's men, the police visits, the way the night air hummed with whispers of who might be next. Their chairs were pushed back, their faces set in the resigned lines of people who'd learned to expect the worst.

Luckachen began to speak, his voice the steady, measured tone that had calmed workers for decades. But Sumi's hand shot up before he could finish.

"Let me," she said, not loud, but firm enough to cut through the tension.

Luckachen paused mid-sentence, his surprise not at her interruption, but at the quiet authority in her voice. After a beat, he stepped back with a nod — not surrender, but trust.

Sumi stood. The ledger on the table was still open, its columns of numbers a testament to what they'd built so far. She faced the workers, her hands clasped not in fear, but in readiness.

"I understand why you're afraid," she said. "Ichaayan and I have been concerned too." Her gaze flicked to the empty chairs where families had sat just weeks ago. "The police. The threats. Watching people vanish in the night like mist — it wears you down. But Ittichen wants this land because it's valuable. And if we let fear decide for us now, we prove something dangerous: that pressure works. That terror is enough to break us."

A murmur rippled through the room. Santosh, the youngest of the Bihar workers, leaned forward, his calloused hands gripping the edge of the table. "But what can we do against someone like him? He's got the police. The money. The — "

"We can do what we've already started," Sumi interrupted, her voice not rising, but hardening. "We can make this land so productive, so well-documented, so legally untouchable through the cooperative that taking it becomes more trouble than it's worth. We turn our fear into proof — proof that we won't break."

She stepped closer to the table, her shadow falling over the ledger like a promise. "My father taught me that some battles aren't won in a day. They're won by refusing to quit. By showing up tomorrow. And the day after. By being more stubborn than the men who think they can starve us out."

Her eyes met Luckachen's. His were bright — not with pride, but with something raw and unguarded. Recognition. His daughter had become not just his heir, but his equal.

She turned back to the workers. "Stay," she said, her voice softer now, but no less certain. "Not for us. For yourselves. Because what we're building here — "she tapped the ledger" — isn't just numbers. It's yours. And that makes it worth fighting for."

The families exchanged glances — long, heavy ones. Santosh's fingers drummed against the table, his jaw tight. Then, slowly, he nodded. "We'll stay," he said. "Through this season. We'll see."

It wasn't surrender. It wasn't even full trust. But it was a start. And for now, that was enough.

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13
The Weight of the Ledger

2002-2005

The new millennium arrived quietly in Poonjar, the way most changes did in the foothills — slow, steady, almost imperceptible until one day you looked around and realised the world had shifted while you were busy living in it.

Sunil's result came on a Tuesday morning in late July 2002. The South Indian Bank probationary officer selection result appeared in Malayala Manorama newspaper, on career page. He checked his roll number with admit card twice before believing what he saw: his roll number in the selected column.

The house in Poonjar erupted. His father, who had once walked five kilometres barefoot to borrow money for school fees, stood speechless for a full minute before the tears came. Dayana squealed and threw her arms around Sunil, nearly knocking him over, while his mother rushed from the kitchen, hands still wet from washing rice, hugging him so tightly he could barely breathe.

"Bank manager," his father kept repeating, his voice not quite steady. "My son. A bank manager." Stephen, usually the quiet one, shook Sunil's hand with a grip that said more than words. The entire family stood in the small living room, five people whose lives had been shaped by financial struggle, looking at a piece of paper that promised something different, something better.

Sunil smiled, embarrassed but proud. He'd worked for this, late nights after college, weekend coaching classes in Pala, and endless mock tests taken in his room with borrowed books.

Every time doubt had crept in during those gruelling months, he'd thought of this moment. Of being able to stand somewhere solid. Of

having something real to offer. He didn't mention Sumi that day — not yet.

Two days later, he received a registered letter, delivered by the local postman. Sunil's face was with full of smile when he signed and received the letter, and he was sure what it was. Posting order from South Indian Bank head office, to join as Assistant Manager, Palakkad rural branch by 30 Aug.

But that evening, alone in his room, he stared at the appointment letter and allowed himself to imagine: walking up to Luckachen's veranda with this paper in hand, being able to say, "I have a job. I can provide. I'm serious about your daughter." The fantasy felt closer than it ever had — real enough to touch.

He waited for next afternoon for the scheduled time for a call to Thopramkudy. Usually, it was Sumi who called up as per opportunity, but the appointment letter he received yesterday had given him some courage.

Sunil picked up the phone and dialled Sumi's number. Sumi picked up the receiver as if she were standing beside that just after one ring. Before anyone say anything, Sunil said "We made it. Selected. Posting in Palakkad."

There was a long pause from the other end then that sweet voice came out "Congratulations! I knew you would. So proud of you." Then, after a small pause before Sunil can reply anything "This change things, doesn't it?"

He stared at those sounds for a moment. "Yes. It does. We can finally start planning." No reply from the other end but he continued "Our future. Everything we had dreamt of till now."

He continued after a small pause. "Friday? After Holy Mass?"

Sunil set the phone down, feeling something shift in his chest – not only the job, but the sense that the waiting might actually be over.

That the future they'd been holding at arm's length might finally be ready to begin.

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In Thopramkudy, Sumi had chosen a different path. No postgraduate studies; no labs in some distant city. The thought of leaving while her father fought for the land, while the cooperative needed building, while everything hung in careful balance — it had felt impossible.

So, she stayed.

She woke with the dawn now, walked the estate paths with Mattaikochu, learning to read the signs he'd learned over forty years, which plants needed more shade, which soil was too acidic, and where water pooled and needed better drainage.

She sat with cooperative members during evening meetings, took notes in a small ledger, and helped draft proposals for government schemes in language that balanced technical requirements with simple clarity.

Her father no longer spoke to her like a child, he spoke to her like a partner.

They sat together on the veranda most evenings after the day's work was done, maps spread between them on the small teapoy, discussing planting schedules, worker shares, and market prices that fluctuated with global demand and local weather.

"The Agriculture Department wants to feature our cooperative in their district newsletter," Luckachen told her one evening in March, a rare note of satisfaction in his voice.

"They're calling it a model for sustainable farming in hill regions." Sumi felt pride warm her chest.

"That's because of the ownership structure. When people have a real stake in success, not just wages, they care differently about outcomes."

"Your idea," he reminded her, looking at her with an expression she'd seen more often lately — respect mixed with surprise.

As Sumi watched her father walk away, buoyed by the strategy she had given him, a cold hollowness settled in her chest. She had meant to be a partner, but she felt like a ghost.

She missed the "badass" armour she wore in the college corridors, the noisy student union rallies, and the way the air felt lighter in the plains.

Here, in the emerald silence of the hills, every small victory for the cooperative felt like a fresh iron bar being added to her own cage. She was building a legacy in lieu of the freedom she had chosen not to take.

That night, looking at her ink-stained fingers, she wondered if she was becoming the land herself — steady, productive, and permanently rooted while the world moved on without her.

Ancy watched this transformation with complicated feelings. Pride, certainly. Her daughter was becoming someone remarkable — someone who spoke with authority about yields and profits, who negotiated with government officers twice her age, and who walked the estate with the same sure-footed confidence her husband had always carried.

But Ancy also noticed other things that pride couldn't quite cover. The way she reacted whenever the telephone rang. Wrong numbers were common when she or Luckachen answered, but never when Sumi did, and her voice dropped to a murmur whenever she spoke on the phone. Ever watchful eyes of Ancy picked up every minute change in Sumi's actions and reactions. The quick smile that would flash across her face when she is replied trough the receiver, then disappear just as quickly when she noticed someone is watching.

Ancy never asked directly. She watched. She waited. She prayed longer at her bedside each evening, asking for guidance she didn't yet have words for.

She kept repeating her refrain: "Your father's biggest dream, mole. A good marriage. The whole village witnessing. A proper wedding at the church, blessed by Fr Mathew."

Sumi would listen, say "Yes, Amma," and change the subject to the harvest or recipes, but the words stayed with her, settling like sediment at the bottom of every other thought.

Sumi also noticed her mother watching her with the particular attention of someone who has put two and two together but is not yet ready to say four.

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Sunil's first day at the South Indian Bank, Palakkad rural branch, began at 8:30 AM in late July 2002. The branch was a single-story building sandwiched between a medical shop and a textile store, smelling of old ledgers and damp concrete. The overhead fans creaked as they turned, barely moving the humid air that seemed to settle into everything — the papers, the furniture, and his freshly ironed shirt.

The manager, Varghese sir, had eyes that had seen too many probationary officers to be impressed. Ramesh, the cheerful clerk, showed Sunil the systems — ancient software that crashed daily and a filing system that made sense only to veterans. "Morning rush is worst," Ramesh explained. "Pensioners come first for withdrawals. Then farmers for loan queries. Afternoons are deposit collections from shopkeepers. Evenings are hell."

Sunil saw it for himself. The morning rush was no longer a sequence of faces, but a blurred assault of sensory demands. He found himself trapped behind the counter, navigating the desperate logic of a farmer explaining a sick buffalo while simultaneously counting out a pensioner's withdrawal in specific, grimy ten-rupee notes.

By 1 PM, the fluorescent lights seemed to hum louder, vibrating against his growing headache as he filled out KYC forms in triplicate, his hand cramping around a pen that felt as heavy as a lead pipe. The professional 'order' he had imagined in college was a myth; here, banking was just a high-stakes hunt for missing rupees in a ledger that refused to balance.

He took the scooter, an ancient Kinetic Honda that sputtered and smoked and drove through the heat to the district office, waited forty minutes for a clerk on a tea break, and reached the branch at 4:30 PM to find the evening rush had begun. When the branch officially closed at 5 PM, reconciliation time started. They sat with ledgers, cross-checking every transaction to find small errors — a hundred rupees missing here, an entry recorded wrong there. Every mistake meant checking every single page again. His eyes burned, and his stomach growled, having eaten only a banana twelve hours ago. At 7:45 PM, they finally balanced. He rode to a single room in a lodge near the railway station that smelled of phenyl, collapsing on a thin mattress, too tired to call anyone.

From then on, every day was work, work, and again work. He was working until 9 PM nearly five days a week. He'd lost count of the customers, the forms, and the problems solved with inadequate authority.

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When her parents were in their afternoon rest on Sunday, Sumi would take courage and speak to Sunil in whispers. The mist would roll in from the valleys, wrapping the estate in white silence, and the distance between Palakkad and Thopramkudy would shrink until it felt like he was beside her. "I wish I could see you," Sunil said one such day.

"It's been almost three months, since that morning at the church."

"Are we waiting for something that's never going to happen?" he asked quietly.

The question hung heavy as the mist. "I don't know," Sumi admitted. "But I am not going to give up. Are you?"

"No." His voice was firm, carrying the same stubborn determination she'd first noticed in him years ago. "Just... scared sometimes. That waiting too long means missing the chance entirely. That one day you'll call and say your parents have decided something, and it'll be too late for us to decide anything."

"Me too," she whispered. The fear was constant now, a low hum underneath everything else. "Every time Amma mentions seeing boys, every time someone brings a proposal, I feel time running out."

"Then maybe we should stop waiting. Maybe we should tell them. My probationary period is over, and my posting as assistant manager will come through soon. After that, we should take the step." He spoke as if his mind were already made up.

The words made her chest lighten. She didn't respond. She just said: "I should go, someone is coming." The line went dead. Sunil stood with the receiver to his ear, feeling something crucial slipping away.

The launch of mobile services in Kerala was a great relief, allowing him and Sumi to talk in the privacy of a room, even though it was expensive. Messaging services and Orkut became affordable lifelines.

But the long conversations that were once the bright spot of each day shrank to quick messages.

Reached safely.

Very busy today.

Talk tomorrow?

He apologised in every text, for reconciliation, for the district office, for falling asleep.

Sumi replied with understanding, It's okay. Focus on work. Don't worry.

But the gaps grew longer.

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Across the valley, Ittichen's machinery ground on, though with less certainty now.

His elder son's death in early April had shaken something fundamental in the family — not just the grief, which was profound and visible, but something deeper. A sense that the immunity they'd

assumed, the protection that wealth and power supposedly provided, was more fragile than they'd believed.

The funeral had been elaborate. The whole village had turned out, whether from respect or morbid curiosity or simply because attendance at such events was expected. The church had been packed. The cemetery had overflowed. The prayers had lasted hours.

But underneath the formal mourning, whispers had circulated. "The hills remember." "Karma finds everyone eventually." "You can't build an empire on other people's suffering and expect no consequences."

No one said it loudly. No one pointed fingers directly. But the murmurs were there, like underground streams, shaping the landscape even when invisible.

Ittichen himself had aged visibly in the weeks after. The glass farmhouse that had always blazed with lights now showed dark windows more often. The quarry trucks moved less frequently. The parties stopped entirely.

Whether it was grief or something else — a rattling of certainty, a question about whether the cost of power had become too high — no one could say. But the village felt it. The shift. The small crack in what had seemed unbreakable.

The amber liquid in Ittichen's glass caught the low light of the study, a shimmering gold that felt like a mockery of the red mud he had spent his childhood trying to wash off his skin. Outside, the mist was a suffocating shroud, but inside the glass farmhouse, everything was sharp, cold, and calculated. This house was his monument to the fact that he had survived the Thurutels, the hills, and the God that had seemingly conspired to keep him in the dirt.

His mind drifted back to the heat of a summer afternoon years ago, a memory that tasted of bile and dry dust, he was back on the red-dust road leading to the Parish Hall. He had been twenty-four, his hands calloused and his pockets beginning to fill with the first "dirty" money from the illegal forest timber trade. He had been a man by then, or at

least he had the muscles of one, but in the eyes of the local elite, he was still the son of a woman who picked pepper for a pittance.

He had dared to ask for the hand of a girl from one of the "established" families — a family whose house had a paved driveway and whose name didn't smell of manual labour. He hadn't asked out of love, but out of a desperate, clawing need to bridge the gap between his mother's curved spine and their polished granite floors.

The rejection hadn't been a polite refusal, old man hadn't even invited him inside, it had been a surgical strike on his soul. He had stood on the steps, looking at Ittichen as if he were a stray dog that had learned a few tricks. "Money can buy you a truck, boy, but it can't buy you a grandfather" old man said, his voice dripping with the effortless cruelty of the well-born. They hadn't just said no; they had laughed at the idea that his "new money," earned from the back-breaking toil of the early quarries, could ever wash away the stain of his lineage. They had treated his proposal like an insult to their bloodline. The laughter from the aunts inside the house had followed Ittichen all the way down the driveway.

He didn't get angry. He got cold.

The memory of their laughter was the fuel that had powered his rise.

He remembered the day of their daughter's engagement reception. A grand affair designed to humiliate men like him by showing exactly what "real" status looked like. He had sat in his first truck, a battered vehicle that felt like a weapon, and waited.

He knew the caterers would be coming from the city, a single van loaded with the pride of the bride's family — the expensive biriyani, the tiered cake, the status. He had parked his truck at the narrowest bend of the hill road, the engine idling like a heartbeat. The plan was simple, cruel, and perfect. He didn't want to kill; he wanted to destroy the one thing they valued more than life, their social standing.

When the van appeared, he didn't feel a flicker of hesitation. He felt a profound sense of order. He had steered his truck into a calculated,

crushing collision. He clipped the back axle with the precision of a jeweller, sending the van spinning into the embankment. He remembered stepping out of his cab, the silence of the hills broken by the pathetic clatter of falling trays. He walked over to the wreckage. The biryani, the centrepiece of their grand reception, was a greasy yellow smear in the red mud. The cake was a white ruin of sugar and glass.

He had looked at the terrified driver and smiled. "Tell your boss, the road is narrow for people with big names," he'd whispered.

He had stayed just long enough to see the panic in the driver's eyes and to imagine the look on the bride's parents' faces when the guests arrived at an empty hall with no food to serve.

The humiliation was total. The reception was a catastrophe. In that moment, as the red dust settled over the ruined feast, Ittichen realised that while he might never be "one of them," he could ensure they were never safe from him.

He took a long, slow draw of his whiskey now, the burn a familiar companion. He had learned that day that the moral universe wasn't governed by justice, but by the ability to inflict shame. He didn't need to be right; he only needed to be the one holding the ledger when the debt came due.

He thought of Luckachen, a man who still clung to his "moral high ground" even as his lungs were betraying him. To Ittichen, Luckachen was just another version of those parents from the engagement hall — a man who thought his dignity made him untouchable.

Ittichen looked at his son's funeral programs stacked on the desk, the white paper gleaming in the dark. His son was gone, yes. The village called it "Karma" assuming the loss would finally break him or prove him wrong. They didn't understand, his son was a casualty of a war that had started on a dusty road years ago.

Ittichen looked at his reflection in the glass. If the price of breaking the Thopramkudy elite was a seat in a lonely house, he would pay it.

He would pay it twice. Because as long as Luckachen and other elites were gasping for air and the hills were trembling under the weight of his trucks, the world was exactly as it should be.

He didn't want their forgiveness. He wanted their silence. And in the mist, he finally had it.

He felt no need for the "clean" moral universe the priest preached about. He had built his empire on the ruins of other people's pride, and if he had to burn the whole valley to keep the Thurutel from looking down on him again, he would do it without a second thought.

The MLA had called him a "learner." Ittichen smiled into the dark. He wasn't learning; he was perfecting. He wasn't just a villain in their story; he was the architect of their downfall, and he was perfectly comfortable with the darkness required to finish the job. The mist could have the hills; he would have the victory.

A few days later, Ittichen and the MLA met at the farmhouse again, this time in the afternoon rather than their usual evening sessions.

They sat in the same glass-walled study, but the whiskey between them sat untouched longer than usual.

"The fool still won't take the money," Ittichen said, referring to Biju.

"Fifteen lakh rupees now. His daughter is nine years old. You'd think a father would do anything for that kind of security."

The MLA sipped his drink thoughtfully. "Some men are stubborn in ways that don't make sense to the rest of us. Pride, principle, whatever you want to call it. They'll suffer rather than bend."

"Then we proceed as planned," Ittichen said.

"The public prosecutor knows what's expected. The court-appointed counsel will be adequate but not aggressive." the MLA assured him.

"And if Luckachen interferes?"

"He can't." The MLA set his glass down with deliberate care. "He's not a party, nor a witness on record."

"You're certain the system will hold?"

"I'm certain the system works in our favour when properly managed." The MLA picked up his glass again, studying the amber liquid.

Ittichen nodded slowly, though something in his expression suggested less certainty than before. "And the cooperative? His project with the workers?"

"Let him have it." The MLA shrugged. "Twenty-five. Twenty-seven families farming four acres? It's nothing. Doesn't affect your operations. Doesn't threaten your position. If anything, it keeps him busy and out of your way. Let him play progressive farmer while we handle real business."

They drank in silence for a moment, looking out at the hills where afternoon mist was beginning to gather.

Outside, the hills kept their ancient silence. The lights in Ittichen's house were steady. He wasn't attacking anymore. He didn't need to. He was just waiting for time and sickness to do the work for him.

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That night, Sunil lay on his thin mattress, holding his new appointment letter — assistant manager, Coimbatore branch. "Another fifty kilometres farther from Sumi. Was destiny moving him further away from her?"

Three hundred kilometres away, Sumi sat on the veranda in Thopramkudy, the mist curling around her like the unspoken words between them, her father's cough echoing through the house like a warning.

Somewhere in the silence between their worlds, the future they had imagined, built on phone calls and stolen moments, began to fray at the edges, not from a single dramatic tear, but from the slow, patient erosion of time and distance.

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14
The Weight of Waiting

2005–2007

On a Friday evening in late November, Sunil finally got out of the Coimbatore branch at a reasonable hour, 7 PM, a minor miracle.

He called Sumi immediately, desperate to hear her voice for more than thirty seconds.

"Hi", She answered on the third ring.

"Hi. Finally. God, it's been many months, since we actually talked."

"I know. How are you? You sound tired."

"I am tired and exhausted. This job is..." he trailed off, not wanting to complain but needing her to understand.

"It's not what I thought it would be. I thought it would be professional, you know? Clean. Organised. But it's chaos. Every single day is chaos."

"Tell me about it. The new branch, the Tamil office culture." Sumi said, and her voice had the particular gentleness that meant she was sitting somewhere private, actually able to focus on the conversation. So, he did.

He told her about the daily sabotage of newly introduced computer systems and the relentless silent scrutiny of Manager who mostly hands over to him the responsibility of bank and is out of office. He described the endless queue, pensioners with their long-life stories and farmers with their incomplete, dog-eared folders, each person a reminder of how little authority he actually held in the face of their desperation.

Sumi laughed softly — not mocking, just the sympathetic laughter of someone who understood absurdity.

"Welcome to actual work."

"Is it like this for you too?"

"Different but similar. Yesterday I spent three hours convincing a worker that we weren't cheating him on the profit share. He didn't trust the calculations. Wanted to see every receipt from every sale for three months. Papa was ready to give up, but I sat with him and went through everything line by line until he understood."

"See, that's the kind of thing I wanted to tell you about," Sunil said, feeling the tightness in his chest ease slightly just from hearing her voice. "All week I've been saving up things to share with you, but by the time I'm free, I'm too tired to even remember what they were."

A pause on the line. Then Sumi said, very quietly: "I miss you."

The words hit him harder than he expected. "I miss you too. So much. Sometimes I..." he stopped, not sure how to explain.

"What?"

"Sometimes I worry I'm forgetting what you look like. Not your face. I remember your face. But the real you. The way you tilt your head when you're thinking. The way you smile with just one corner of your mouth when you're amused. The sound of your actual voice, not through a phone. I'm forgetting the real things."

Silence on the other end. Then: "I know what you mean."

Another pause, heavier this time. "Sunil," Sumi said, and her voice had changed, less gentle, more strained. "I got your message about starting to plan. About us, about the future. But I don't know how to plan anything when we can't even find time to talk. When days go by and the most we manage is 'good morning' and 'good night' texts."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm not blaming you. I know you took this promotion and moved to such a location, partly because you thought it would help when we... when we talk to my parents"

She continued with troubled voice "But Sunil, what good is a job if we never see each other? If we can't even have a proper conversation?"

He didn't have an answer. Because she was right. The job that was supposed to make their future possible was making their present impossible.

"My mother is asking questions. About why I'm not interested in proposals. About whether there's someone. And I keep saying no, keep putting her off, but how long can I do that? Every week a new proposal comes. Every week I find a reason to say no. But eventually they're going to ask why I'm saying no to everyone."

"Then tell them about me." The words came out before he could stop them.

Silence. Long enough that he thought the call had dropped. "Sumi?"

"Tell them what?" her voice was barely above a whisper now.

"That I've been talking to a boy for all these years that they've never met? That I've been hiding you from them while Papa treats me like a partner, while Amma dreams of a big village wedding? Tell them I want to marry someone from a family they don't know, in a life they haven't approved?"

"Yes."

"And then what? They say yes and everything is fine?" The strain was turning to something sharper now.

"You don't know my father. You don't know what it means in Thopramkudy when a girl goes against her family's wishes. You don't know —" she stopped, voice breaking.

"Then help me understand. Tell me what I don't know."

She was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke again, she was holding her voice steady against tears she didn't want to let fall. "I don't want to choose, Sunil. I don't want to be the daughter who breaks her father's heart after he's finally learned to trust her. I don't

want to be the girl who makes her mother cry. I don't want to be the scandal that people whisper about in church. But I also don't want to lose you. I don't want to wake up one day and realize I chose safety and spent the rest of my life wondering 'what if'."

"So, what do we do?"

"I don't know," the helplessness in her voice mirrored his own.

"I just need more time to figure it out. To find the right moment. The right way. Just… a little more time."

Time.

Everyone kept saying they needed more time.

But time wasn't waiting for them. It kept moving, taking them with it, ready or not.

"Okay," Sunil said, even though nothing felt okay. "We'll wait. Figure it out together. But Sumi —."

"Yes?"

"Don't wait so long that there's no time left. Don't wait until the choice is made for you."

She didn't respond to that. Just said, very quietly: "I should go. I hear Papa coughing. I need to check on him."

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know. The cough is getting worse. He'd see a doctor, but said it was nothing serious. But I don't think that's true. I don't think he's telling us everything."

"Have you asked him directly?"

"How can I? When I'm keeping secrets too?" The irony was heavy in her voice. "How can I demand honesty when I'm not giving it?"

They were both quiet then. Neither of them tried to fill it.

“I love you,” Sunil said. The words came out rough, unpractised — he didn’t say them often, afraid that speaking love too freely would make it seem common when it felt anything but.

“I —” she started, then stopped. “I should go.” The line went dead.

When the line went dead, Sumi didn't move.

She stared at the small screen of her new mobile, the blue light making her room feel as sterile as the hospital corridors she feared. Reading Sunil’s messages about his meagre meals and late-night finishes ground her down. He was enduring a "baptism-by-fire" for a future they couldn’t even discuss openly, while she was being "gifted" a life of comfort she no longer recognised.

She watched her father age — the way he held the boundary wall for support, his knuckles turning white — and realised the family name, she had tried to absorb was no longer a shield. It was a weight. She was becoming too competent to be allowed to leave, and too beloved to ever be allowed to be herself.

****

While Sunil drowned in ledgers, Three valleys away in Thopramkudy, Giri was learning what purpose felt like when it arrived without applause.

Giri found his footing in a different battle. His seat on the cooperative bank board gave him the chance to actually change things.

For the first time in his political life, his energy was channelling into something concrete. Something where he could measure impact not in slogans chanted or rallies held, but in farmers getting fair interest rates, in women’s self-help groups accessing credit without exploitative terms, in small changes that rippled through real lives.

He learned rural credit systems and deposit mobilisation, finding a quiet dignity in unglamorous work. The older board members, men who had initially looked at him with the sceptical amusement reserved

for young idealists, had slowly begun to accept him. Not as an equal yet, but as someone worth listening to.

And after the shame of the march against Luckachen, after learning how easily good intentions could be weaponized by people who understood power better than he had, Giri craved something real.

He stayed in touch with Priya, who had left for Bhubaneswar for her research at the Institute of Physics. They'd talk for an hour, Priya telling him about condensed matter physics and lab days, while Giri spoke of interest rate negotiations and helping farmers.

"You've grown up," Priya told him, her voice a bridge across the distance.

"I miss you," Giri said, the admission easier now than it had been months ago when they were still figuring out what they were to each other.

"I miss you too." Her voice softened.

"How's Sunil doing? Have you talked to him?"

"Briefly. He's drowning in work. New job, new location, new people, long hours, that whole baptism-by-fire thing banks apparently as a new assistant manager."

"And Sumi?"

"Haven't seen her much. She's always at the estate or with the cooperative members. I see her father sometimes at the bank when he comes for cooperative business, but..." he trailed off.

"But?"

"But he still won't look at me. Won't acknowledge me. Just does his business and leaves. I can't blame him."

"Idealism with experience becomes wisdom," Priya said. "Idealism without experience is just noise."

Priya was quiet for a moment. "Give it time. People forgive eventually. Especially people like Luckachen uncle who understand complexity."

"Maybe," Giri said, though he wasn't convinced. "How's your research going? Still working on that project about superconductivity or whatever it was?"

She laughed. "Superconductivity is a different field entirely. My project is on electronic properties of two-dimensional materials. Completely different."

"See, this is why I do banking and not physics. I have no idea what you just said."

"You don't need to understand the science. You just need to understand that I'm happy."

"Are you?" he asked, suddenly serious. "Really happy? Not just busy and tired and calling it happiness?"

She was quiet long enough that he wondered if he'd pushed too far. "Yes," she said finally. "I'm really happy. Challenged and scared and out of my depth half the time, but happy. This is what I was meant to do. I can feel it."

"Good," Giri said, meaning it completely. "Then it was worth it. All the distance, all the missing you. Worth it."

After they hung up, Giri sat in his small cooperative office — one room, a table covered in bank files and cooperative society documents — and felt something he'd been chasing since college without knowing its name.

Purpose.

Not the loud, public kind that came from rallies and speeches. But the quiet kind that came from waking up each morning knowing the work you did mattered to actual people whose names and faces you knew.

It wasn't the future he'd imagined for himself in college. But it was better than what he'd imagined, because it was real.

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The cough that started a few years back, had become something he couldn't ignore. It woke him at night, deep, rattling coughs that shook his whole chest and left him gasping.

Ancy would sit up beside him in the dark, hand on his back, making soft worried sounds while he fought for breath. She'd gotten up so many times recently that she'd started keeping a water bottle on her nightstand, ready for the inevitable 2 AM coughing fits. The medications from the local hospital doctor hadn't helped. If anything, the cough had grown worse — deeper, more persistent, accompanied now by a tightness in his chest that made physical work difficult.

Ancy watched him cough and felt a cold fear. "If you are going to protect this family." she said quietly. "You must do it right. And you cannot do it if you are not here. Promise me you will see the doctor."

Luckachen had nodded, too tired to argue. "After the Spices Board meeting. I have to go to Ernakulam anyway in mid-March. I'll see someone then."

"Promise?"

He'd looked at her, at the worry lines deep around her eyes, at the way her hands trembled slightly when she wasn't busy with work and felt guilt mix with affection.

"I promise."

Luckachen got up and moved toward the sit-out, telling Ancy, "I need some fresh air, you sleep."

Sitting at his favoured chair, Luckachen thought about time. About a daughter who was becoming someone remarkable and the future she deserved. The mist rolled in thicker than before. And in the silence, the hills kept their slow, patient watch.

****

The Spices Board meeting was scheduled for Thursday, March 18th. Luckachen left for Ernakulam a day early, his overnight bag packed alongside files — and a reason he hadn't shared with Ancy: a doctor's appointment at the Aster Medical Centre.

The hospital smelled of disinfectant and air-conditioned sterility, a world away from Thopramkudy's mist and cardamom. The waiting room was full, old men with oxygen masks, young women clutching tissues, children wheezing into their mothers' shoulders. Luckachen sat, watching the universal language of respiratory distress, until a nurse called his name.

Dr. Raghavan, a man in his late fifties with steady hands and wire-rimmed glasses, listened to Luckachen's chest for a long time. Too long.

"First-stage lung cancer," the doctor said, turning the monitor to show a grainy black-and-white scan, a coin-sized shadow in the lower right lobe. The doctor said it was early, but they needed to cut the shadow out soon. It would cost a lot, but time was the bigger price.

Luckachen stared at the screen. He'd expected bronchitis. Maybe pneumonia. Not this.

"Success rate?" he asked, voice steadier than he felt.

"Surgical removal, lobectomy, gives you a 75–80% five-year survival rate. Without treatment, it spreads. Three to six months before it moves to Stage 2."

"Cost?"

"Three to four lakh. But the real issue is time. Schedule surgery within two months."

Luckachen nodded, already calculating. "Recovery?"

"Six to eight weeks. No heavy physical work for two months after."

The doctor handed him a packet of papers. "Read this. Talk to your family. Then call my office."

"Tell your family," Dr. Raghavan added as Luckachen reached the door. "They need to know."

That night, Luckachen lay awake in the Ernakulam hotel room, the diagnosis pressing against his ribs like the mist outside the window. Three to six months. The words echoed with the ticking clock of Sumi's future, the cooperative's survival, the land still contested by Ittichen.

He thought of Ancy's worry, of Sumi's careful smiles when she thought no one was watching, of the proposal papers waiting on his desk at home. One battle at a time, he told himself. But even as he thought it, he thought about the small shadow in his lung and about every future that wouldn't happen if he waited much longer.

****

Marriage proposals arrived like a steady tide in late March, but Luckachen turned them away before they could even reach the veranda.

First, there was the government officer's son from Kozhikode, respectable and steady. "Too far," Luckachen said, barely looking at the photo. "She would be a stranger in a city that doesn't know our hills."

Then came the doctor from Pala. Ancy was hopeful, a doctor was the ultimate prize, but Luckachen found the flaw within minutes of meeting the father. "He wants a housekeeper to manage his life, not a partner to walk the estate," he told a frustrated Ancy.

Sumi watched from the hallway; her heart heavy. She wondered if her father was protecting her from the wrong men, or if he was punishing her for wanting a life he hadn't planned. Every rejection felt like a brick being added to a wall she couldn't climb.

Ancy's frustration simmered. "Every proposal you find a reason to reject!"

"Because none of them are right for her," he said quietly. "She's not just a daughter. She's a partner in the cooperative, in the estate. She needs someone who understands that."

The third proposal arrived in late April, carried by Fr Mathew during an evening visit. "Joseph family from Kattapana," the priest said. "Old name in the area. Spice farming, Mahindra dealerships. The boy, Joseph junior, is twenty-nine, educated, looking for a partner, not just a wife."

Luckachen listened, watching Sumi through the window as she walked the estate paths with Mattaikochu. "Tell me about the boy's character."

"Quiet but not shy. Confident but not arrogant. He wants someone who understands the hills, who can be a partner in the business."

Ancy's hope was palpable. "This one feels different."

Luckachen nodded. "We'll meet them. Sunday after next."

****

That night, Sumi sat on her bed, the proposal papers spread before her. The Kattapana boy's details were impressive — land, education, a life that mirrored her own.

But as she read, her phone buzzed with a message from Sunil: "Miss you. When can we talk?"

She set the papers aside, staring at the screen. The boy in the proposal was safe, respectable, everything her parents wanted. But he wasn't Sunil, who knew her dreams, who'd raced across campus for forgotten garlands, who'd waited these many years without complaint.

She traced the Kattapana boy's name on the paper, her finger trembling. His life was laid out in neat bullet points — land, education, stability, while Sunil's last message glowed on her phone: "We'll figure it out. Together." The contrast made her chest ache.

She typed back: "Soon. Things are complicated here."

Her mother's voice carried from the kitchen: "Sumi, come help with the thoran."

Sumi looked at his photo and then at Sunil's text. One was a safe harbour; the other was a storm she wasn't sure she could survive.

She slipped the phone under her pillow. The proposal sat on one side of her chest, the secret on the other, pressing about the same amount.

****

The next evening, Ancy cornered Luckachen in his office. "She has turned down every proposal—three proposals in two months! Either you find a reason to turn them down, or else she does."

Luckachen set down his pen. "Because none of them were right."

"Or because there's someone else." Ancy's hands twisted together. "I've seen how she is with her phone after you gifted her the new mobile. The way she steps away when it rings. The quick smiles. She's hiding something."

Luckachen's jaw tightened. He'd noticed too, the late-night calls, the careful distance when he or Ancy entered a room.

"If there's someone, she'll tell us when she's ready."

"And if she doesn't?" Ancy's voice was pleading. "What if we're waiting for a match that doesn't exist because her heart is already somewhere else?"

Luckachen looked toward the veranda, where Sumi's laughter drifted in from the garden. "Then we'll deal with it. But we won't force her into a life that isn't hers."

****

Sumi stayed in the church long after the last Amen of the Friday Holy Mass. The murmurs of the departing worshippers faded, leaving only a hollow echo that vibrated against the massive teak pillars. Only two elderly women remained in the back pews, their rosaries clicking with

a rhythmic, mechanical persistence — a clock counting down to a choice she still wasn't ready to make.

She knelt, her fingers digging into the soft flesh of her palms until it stung. Her gaze remained fixed on the crucifix above the altar, not seeking an answer, but because the wooden figure was the only thing in Thopramkudy that didn't demand a smile or a report.

“I don’t know what to do,” she whispered. The words felt raw, scraping against a throat tight with weeks of suppressed silence. "I love them both. I know I can’t keep one without breaking the other. Am I being brave, or am I just being selfish?”

The silence of the nave pressed back, thick and unyielding as the mist outside. It offered no comfort. Fr Mathew walked past the side aisle, his sandals echoing briefly on the stone before he disappeared into the vestry without a glance in her direction.

She waited for a sign — a warmth in her chest, a flicker of a candle, a sudden clarity. But the shadows remained still. The realisation was a cold weight; she would have to find the courage on her own.

When she finally stood and stepped out of the heavy doors, the afternoon sunlight was a blinding, indifferent glare. The weight in her chest hadn't vanished, but it had shifted. It was no longer a burden she was trying to escape, but a thing she had decided to carry.

“I’ll tell them,” she promised the empty sky, her voice lost in the rustle of the surrounding cardamom trees. “Eventually.”

The lie burned like holy water on a fresh wound, but she swallowed it anyway. As she walked toward the estate, the olive-green Scorpio sat idling in the distance, a silent reminder that her time, like her father's breath, was no longer her own.

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15
The Things We Carry

May–June 2007

The next morning, Ancy told Sumi about the proposal over breakfast.

They were alone in the kitchen. Luckachen had already left for the lower fields with Mattaikochu. Morning sun slanted through the window, catching dust motes in its light. The smell of fresh kanji and coconut chutney filled the small space.

"Fr. Mathew came yesterday evening," Ancy said, her tone carefully casual as she served Sumi rice. "With a proposal. From Kattapana."

Sumi's hand stilled briefly on her glass of water. Then she picked it up, took a sip, set it down with deliberate care. "Okay."

"Joseph family. Old spice trading family. The boy runs Mahindra dealerships." Ancy watched her daughter's face as she spoke, looking for some reaction, some sign of interest or resistance.

Sumi's expression remained neutral. "What did Papa say?"

"He said yes to meeting them. They'll come Sunday after next. For Pennukanal." Ancy paused. "Your father thinks this one might be different. The boy understands estate management, knows the hills. Not a city person who'll expect you to leave everything behind."

"That's good," Sumi said. Her voice was even, polite, giving nothing away.

Ancy set the serving spoon down with more force than necessary. "Sumi, you can tell me if there's something wrong. If you don't want to meet him, if there's some reason you're not interested in proposals — "

"There's nothing wrong, Amma." Sumi met her mother's eyes steadily. "I'll meet him. It's fine."

But the word "fine" hung in the air between them, carrying weight it shouldn't have. Fine wasn't enthusiasm. Fine wasn't even interested. Fine was the word you used when you didn't want to fight but couldn't quite agree either.

Ancy wanted to push, wanted to ask the questions that had been building for weeks. But something in Sumi's expression, a fragility underneath the calm, stopped her.

"Okay," she said instead. "We'll prepare properly. New salwar. Your gold jewellery cleaned. Make a good impression."

"Okay, Amma."

After breakfast, Sumi helped with the dishes in silence, then said she needed to check on something at the cooperative office. She left before Ancy could ask more questions.

She didn't go to the cooperative office.

Instead, she walked to the far edge of the estate, to a spot where a large rock overlooked the valley. It was her thinking place — had been since childhood, when she'd come here to escape her mother's constant hovering or to puzzle through school problems.

She sat on the rock, pulled out her phone, stared at it for a long moment.

Seven missed calls from Sunil over the past two days. She'd been meaning to call back, but between cooperative work and avoiding her mother's increasingly pointed questions about marriage, there'd been no good time. No private moment where she could talk freely without fear of being overheard.

She called now.

Sunil answered on the second ring. "Sumi." His voice carried relief and exhaustion in equal measure. "I was starting to worry."

"I'm sorry. Things have been… complicated."

"Tell me."

So, she did. Sitting on the rock with the valley spread below her, she told him about the three proposals that had come and gone, about her mother's growing suspicion, about Fr Mathew's visit last night, about the Pennukanal scheduled for Sunday after next.

Sunil listened without interrupting. When she finished, the silence on the line hung heavy.

"So, you're going to meet him," he said finally. Not a question. Just a statement of fact.

"What else can I do? If I refuse without a good reason, they'll know something's wrong. They'll start asking questions I can't answer."

"You could tell them about me."

The words were quiet but weighted with everything unsaid between them.

"Sunil — "

"I'm serious. You could tell them right now. Before Joseph even comes to your house. Tell them there's someone, that you've been talking to me from college times, that you want them to meet me properly."

Sumi closed her eyes, pressing her palm against the warm stone beneath her. "And what would I say when they ask about your family? When they ask why we kept it secret all these years? When they ask what kind of girl hides a relationship from her parents while working alongside her father every day, letting him trust her?"

"You'd say you were scared. That you didn't know how to tell them. That you loved them and didn't want to disappoint them but you also loved me."

"Love," Sumi repeated, the word feeling both too small and too large. "You said it yesterday too. On the phone before you hung up."

"Because it's true." Sunil's voice was raw now, stripped of the careful distance they usually maintained. "I love you. I've loved you since that

first tea at the canteen steps, maybe even before that. And I thought you felt the same way. Was I wrong?"

"No," she whispered. "You weren't wrong."

"Then why does it feel like you're slipping away? Like you're already preparing to choose someone else?"

"I'm not — " she started, then stopped, because maybe she was. Maybe by agreeing to meet Joseph, by not telling her parents the truth, by letting time keep passing without making any hard decisions, she was choosing. Just slowly. Invisibly. In a way that let her avoid the confrontation but led to the same ending.

"I need more time," she said, and even as the words left her mouth, she heard how hollow they sounded. How many times had she said that? How long could "more time" last before it ran out entirely?

"How much time?" Sunil asked. "Two weeks until he comes to your house? A month until your parents start talking about engagement? Six months until you're married to someone else because you were too scared to fight for what you wanted?"

The harshness in his voice made her flinch. But underneath the harshness was pain, and that was worse.

"That's not fair," she said.

"None of this is fair." His voice cracked slightly. "It's not fair that I'm working sixteen-hour a day, trying to build a future for us while you're meeting other men. It's not fair that I can't sleep because I'm terrified, you'll call one day and say your parents have decided. It's not fair that I love you this much and it's still not enough."

Tears were running down Sumi's face now, hot and silent. "It is enough. You are enough. It's not about that."

"Then what is it about?"

"It's about not knowing how to choose between the two most important things in my life. Between you and them. Between the

future I want and the daughter they deserve." Her voice broke. "Do you know what it's like, working beside Papa every day? Seeing him finally treat me as an equal? Knowing that the moment I tell him about you, that trust shatters? That he'll wonder what else I've been hiding, what else I've lied about?"

"You haven't lied — "

"Yes, I have. By omission. Every day I don't tell them is another lie. Every proposal I reject without giving the real reason is another lie. I'm drowning in lies, Sunil, and I don't know how to stop without destroying everything."

They were both quiet for a long moment. Across the valley, a bird called — sharp and lonely.

"Meet him," Sunil said finally, his voice hollow. "Meet this Joseph. See if he's everything your parents want. See if you can imagine a life with him that doesn't feel like settling. And then decide."

"Sunil — "

"I mean it. Because I can't keep doing this. Can't keep waiting in limbo, wondering if every call is the one where you tell me it's over. I need to know, Sumi. One way or the other. And maybe meeting him will help you figure that out."

"And if I can't decide even after meeting him?"

"Then you've already decided. You're just afraid to admit it."

The words landed like a slap. True and terrible.

"I have to go," Sunil said. "We'll talk after... after you know."

The line went dead. Sumi sat on the rock, feeling the future closing in.

On the other end, Sunil didn't move. He looked at the promotion cum posting letter on his desk. The one he hadn't mentioned to her. Deputy Manager, Madurai branch. A salary that would have rewritten his family's financial status.

He thought of Sumi looking at another man's photos while he sat in a sweating office he had just refused to leave. He had traded an easy life for a hope that was currently silent. He had lost what was in his hand, and he was terrified he would never receive what he was waiting for. The strength he'd been trying to borrow from Luckachen's example felt too heavy to hold, and for the first time in months, he let himself cry.

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The week before the Pennukanal passed in a blur of preparation.

Ancy threw herself into it with the focused energy of someone who'd been waiting for this moment for years. She cleaned the house top to bottom, polished the latest cutlery and crockery, planned the menu with military precision: fish curry and appam, beef fry, olan, thoran, avial, payasam — food that showed both skill and abundance.

"Not too much," Luckachen cautioned one evening, watching her make lists. "We don't want to look like we're trying too hard."

"We're not trying too hard," Ancy replied, not looking up from her menu planning. "We're showing proper hospitality. There's a difference."

Sumi helped where asked, moving through the preparations mechanically, polishing silverware, helping choose furniture arrangements, offering opinions on menu items when requested.

At night, alone in her room, she typed messages to Sunil that she deleted before sending. Started phone calls she cancelled before they connected. The distance between them had grown from something painful to something almost familiar — a low ache that she'd learned to carry without acknowledging.

He hadn't called since that conversation on the rock. She hadn't called him. They were giving each other space, she told herself. Giving the situation room to resolve itself.

But the silence felt less like space and more like the beginning of an ending.

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Sunday arrived with weather that seemed specifically designed for Pennukanal — clear sky, gentle breeze, the mist having lifted early to reveal the estate in its full green glory.

Ancy was up before dawn, moving through the kitchen with the focused energy of someone executing a long-planned campaign. By eight AM, the first dishes were ready and cooling. By nine, the house smelled of cooking — spices and coconut and the particular richness of well-made Kerala food.

Luckachen dressed carefully in his best white kurta, the one he saved for church festivals and important occasions. His cough had been worse lately, the new medicines from Ernakulam helping but not eliminating it. But today he took extra cough syrup to ensure he wouldn't have an embarrassing fit during the visit.

Sumi bathed early, took her time with her hair, applied the minimal makeup Ancy had insisted on kajal, a touch of lipstick, nothing too heavy. The new pale blue salwar fit perfectly, the gold embroidery on the dupatta catching light when she moved. Her grandmother's gold necklace and earrings completed the look.

When she emerged from her room at ten-thirty, Ancy actually gasped.

"My daughter," she said, and her voice caught on the second word. "So beautiful."

Luckachen, sitting on the veranda reviewing some last-minute details, looked up and felt his breath catch. When had his little girl become this poised young woman? When had she learned to carry herself with such grace?

The vehicles arrived at eleven-fifteen, a Mahindra Scorpio and an Innova, both new, both gleaming in the late morning sun.

Luckachen and Ancy stood on the veranda to receive them, Sumi a step behind as custom dictated. Mattaikochu had positioned himself near the gate, ready to help with anything needed.

The Scorpio's door opened first, and Joseph Sr emerged — a man in his early sixties, solidly built, wearing a simple white shirt and mundu with the unselfconscious confidence of someone who'd earned his position through work rather than inheritance. His handshake with Luckachen was firm, his smile genuine.

"Luckachen, thank you for receiving us," he said, his Malayalam carrying the particular accent of old Idukki families — measured, clear, each word given its proper weight.

His wife came next, Mariamma, a woman in her late fifties wearing a traditional Kanchipuram saree, her hair neatly pulled back, gold jewellery that spoke of established prosperity without ostentation. She touched Ancy's hand in greeting, her smile warm.

"What a beautiful plantation," she said, looking around at the terraced cardamom plots visible from the veranda. "Fr Mathew said it was impressive, but seeing it yourself... this is what real farming looks like."

Then Joseph junior emerged from the Innova.

Sumi's first impression was that she was taller than expected. Easily six feet, broad-shouldered but not heavy, moving with the easy athleticism of someone who spent time outdoors. He wore a light blue shirt, coincidentally almost matching her salwar, and dark trousers, the outfit striking a balance between formal and approachable.

His face was pleasant rather than handsome – strong jaw, clear eyes – not a handsome face exactly, but one that looked like it had earned itself. When he smiled greeting Luckachen and Ancy, the smile reached his eyes, crinkling the corners in a way that suggested frequent use.

Then his eyes found Sumi, and something in his expression shifted — not dramatically, not with the kind of obvious interest that would be

inappropriate at first meeting, but with a quiet attention that suggested genuine seeing rather than just looking.

"Sumi," he said, and his voice was deeper than she'd expected, resonant without being loud.

"It's good to finally meet you. Fr. Mathew has spoken highly of your work with the cooperative."

"Thank you," she said, surprised that her voice came out steady.

"Please, come inside. Amma has prepared food."

They moved into the house — the elders to the sitting room, settling into conversation with the practiced ease of people used to these social rituals. But almost immediately, Joseph senior turned to Luckachen.

"Would it be inappropriate to ask for a tour of the estate first? Before we get comfortable inside? I have to admit, I'm more interested in your cooperative model than anything else. We've been trying something similar in Kattapana with mixed results."

Luckachen's face brightened — this was his territory, his passion. "Not inappropriate at all. I'd be happy to show you."

And so, the party split — the fathers and Mattaikochu heading toward the cooperative processing shed and the lower fields, deep in conversation about profit-sharing models and organic certification before they'd even left the veranda.

The mothers moved into the kitchen, Mariamma insisting on helping despite Ancy's protests, and within minutes they were deep in conversation about recipes and household management, finding common ground in the universal language of women who run homes and families.

Which left Sumi and Joseph alone on the veranda.

For a long moment, neither spoke. The situation was inherently awkward, two strangers being assessed for lifelong compatibility,

expected to have meaningful conversation while knowing every word was being evaluated by families listening from nearby rooms.

Joseph broke the silence first, with unexpected directness.

"This is strange, isn't it?" He smiled, self-deprecating. "Sitting here like we're auditioning for each other. I never know quite how these things are supposed to work."

Sumi felt surprise ripple through her. She'd expected careful formality, practiced charm, the kind of scripted conversation she'd had with the other proposals. Not this casual honesty.

"Very strange," she agreed, relaxing slightly. "Like being interviewed for a job you didn't apply for."

He laughed — a genuine laugh, unguarded. "Exactly. And the interviewers are in the next room pretending not to listen while hanging on every word."

Despite herself, Sumi smiled. "Should we just speak very loudly then? Make it easier for them?"

"We seem very compatible," Joseph said in an exaggerated voice, and Sumi had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing too obviously.

The tension broke. They looked at each other, and something shifted — not attraction necessarily, but the beginning of ease. The recognition that they were both caught in the same awkward social ritual and could at least acknowledge the absurdity together.

"So," Joseph said, voice returning to normal volume but still warm with amusement, "tell me honestly, are you here because you want to be, or because saying no to your parents about meeting me was too complicated?"

The directness caught her off guard again. "Is honesty allowed for Pennukanal? I thought we were supposed to present our best selves."

"My best self is honest. Everything else is too exhausting to maintain long-term." He leaned back in his chair, studying her with open

curiosity. "I've met three other girls in the past year. All of them said exactly what they thought their parents wanted them to say. None of them told me what they actually thought or wanted. I'm trying a different approach this time."

Sumi considered him — this unexpectedly direct man who seemed to be treating this less like an audition and more like an actual conversation.

"Both," she admitted. "I'm here partly because my parents wanted me to be. But also, because..." she paused, choosing words carefully, "because I needed to see for myself. What this could be."

"Fair enough. Same for me. My parents have been pushing for marriage for two years. I kept saying no because the matches felt wrong — either girls who wanted city life and I'd have to pretend to be someone I'm not, or girls who wanted traditional marriage where I make all decisions and they run the household. Neither felt right."

"What does feel right?" Sumi asked, genuinely curious now.

"Partnership." The word came without hesitation. "I don't want a wife who just waits for me to come home. I want someone who can stand beside me. My parents work as a team — they fight, they agree, but they are equals. That is the only kind of marriage I want."

Sumi felt something catch in her chest. This was almost exactly what her father had said when rejecting the other proposals — that she needed someone who would value her as a partner.

"Fr. Mathew mentioned you work with your father on the cooperative," Joseph continued. "That was actually what made me interested in meeting you. A girl who understands estate management, who can handle workers and government officers, who thinks strategically about farming — that's rare. And valuable."

"It might not be valuable to everyone," Sumi said carefully. "Some men would see it as competition rather than contribution."

"Then they're idiots," Joseph said, his voice matter-of-fact. "I run dealerships in two locations. I need someone who can think independently, make decisions, handle problems without me hovering. My business often takes me away for days. I need a partner who can hold things together, not someone who'll panic the moment I'm not there."

They talked for another ten minutes, about the cooperative model, about his dealerships, about the challenges of maintaining quality in service businesses, about organic certification processes. The conversation flowed easily, naturally, finding common ground in shared understanding of how businesses actually worked rather than how they looked on paper.

When the mothers emerged from the kitchen, calling them for lunch, Sumi realized with surprise that she'd actually enjoyed talking to him. Not in the way she enjoyed talking to Sunil — there was none of that electric connection, that sense of being completely understood. But there was ease. Compatibility. The sense that they could build something functional together, even if it wasn't built on romantic love.

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After lunch, while the elders had tea in the sitting room, Joseph asked if Sumi could show him the cooperative land.

"If that's appropriate," he added, looking at Luckachen.

Luckachen glanced at Ancy, who gave a subtle nod. "Yes, of course. Sumi knows it better than I do anyway."

They walked down toward the lower fields. Sumi in front, Joseph a respectful distance behind, both aware that eyes were watching from the house even if pretending not to.

The afternoon sun was warm but not uncomfortable, the breeze carrying the scent of cardamom flowers and damp earth. Workers in the fields looked up as they passed, recognizing Sumi and returning to their work when she waved.

"This is it," Sumi said when they reached the four-acre plot. "The land my father refused to sell. The reason for all the trouble."

Sumi saw Joseph surveying the land with practiced eyes, looking few of the plants nearby, the irrigation pipelines, and the terracing that prevented erosion.

"It's beautiful land," he said. "Good soil, proper drainage, well-maintained. I can see why you fought to keep it."

"We fought because it was right," Sumi corrected. "Not just because it's good land. Because selling it would have meant giving in to corruption, to people who think power means they can take whatever they want."

Joseph looked at her with something like respect. "Fr. Mathew mentioned your father stood up to Ittichen. That takes courage. Ittichen is... not someone people usually oppose."

"I know." Sumi's voice was quiet. "It costs us. Workers leaving in fear. Police investigations. Constant pressure. Even now, the case is ongoing. A man is in jail because he wouldn't take bribe money to confess to something he didn't do alone."

"But the cooperative survived. Grew even."

"Because Papa was stubborn. And because the workers believed in the model enough to stay despite the fear."

They walked in silence for a moment, footsteps soft on the dirt path between the cardamom rows.

"Can I ask you something personal?" Joseph said finally.

"You can ask. I might not answer."

He smiled at that. "Fair. But I'm curious, what do you want? Not what your parents want for you, not what makes sense strategically. What does Sumi actually want from life?"

The question landed heavier than he probably intended. Because Sumi didn't have an answer. Or rather, she had too many answers that contradicted each other.

She wanted to stay in the hills, working the land, building something meaningful with the cooperative. She wanted her parents' approval and blessing. She wanted to marry someone she loved rather than someone appropriate. She wanted to not have to choose between duty and desire. She wanted time to stop pressing forward so relentlessly, demanding decisions before she was ready.

"I don't know," she said finally, and the honesty felt like relief. "I thought I knew. But lately everything feels complicated."

"Because of your parents' expectations?"

"Partly. And partly because..." she trailed off, not sure how honest she could be with this stranger who might become something more.

"Because there's someone else," Joseph finished for her.

Sumi's head whipped up, eyes wide. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." His voice was gentle, not accusing. "I've been in enough of these meetings to recognise the signs. The way you check your phone when you think no one's looking. The careful way you talk about the future without committing to anything. The slight distance in your eyes even when you're engaged in conversation."

Her heart hammered. "If you think that, why are you here? Why continue with this?"

Joseph was quiet for a moment, looking out at the valley spread below them.

"Because I'm twenty-nine," he said finally. "Because my parents are getting older and want to see me settled. Because every match I've met so far has been wrong for different reasons, but you..." he turned to look at her directly, "you're not wrong. You're complicated, yes. Maybe involved with someone your parents don't know about, probably. But you're not wrong."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Maybe not. But here's what I think, arranged marriages work best when both people are choosing each other with clear eyes. Not in love, necessarily, but compatible. Respectful. Willing to build something together even if it doesn't start with romance." He paused. "I could see building something with you. The question is whether you could see building something with me."

Sumi stared at him, this man who'd somehow seen through her in an afternoon, who was being more honest than the situation typically allowed.

"I don't know," she said again. "I'm sorry, but I genuinely don't know."

"That's okay." Joseph's voice remained kind. "You don't have to know today. Take time. Think about it. Talk to whoever you need to talk to. And then decide — not what makes your parents happy, not what makes sense on paper, but what you actually want."

As Joseph looked at her, Sumi realized her mask was slipping. She had spent all these years after college, building a version of herself for her parents, but this stranger had seen the truth in an afternoon. It was a terrifying thought: that the people who loved her most knew her the least.

They walked back to the house in silence, but it was a different quality of silence than before. Less awkward, more contemplative.

The ease she felt with Joseph was the most terrifying part of the afternoon. It was the quiet, functional happiness of a life without friction — a life where she remained the "Thurutel Prize" and everyone stayed safe.

But as she walked him through the fields, she felt a profound grief for the girl who had once stood at the hostel gate. She was auditing her heart like a ledger, measuring the stability Joseph offered against the raw, exhausting hope Sunil carried.

She realized then that if she stayed, she would eventually be "content," but she would spend the rest of her life as an orphan of her own convenience, wondering which version of herself had died to make this "perfect match" possible.

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That night, Sumi sat on the veranda with her phone.

She'd typed and deleted messages for an hour. Finally, she just called.

Sunil answered on the first ring. "So?"

"So he's nice. Smart. Honest in unexpected ways. Saw right through me within an hour."

"And?"

"And he basically said he knows there's someone else, but he's willing to see if we could build something anyway because on paper we're compatible."

Silence on the line. Then: "Jesus, Sumi. He actually said that?"

"More or less. He told me to take time, think about what I actually want, not just what makes sense."

"So what do you want?"

The question Joseph had asked her that afternoon. The question Sunil had been asking in different ways for months. The question she still didn't have an answer for.

"I want to not have to choose," she said, voice breaking. "I want you and them both. I want love and approval. I want the future I imagine with you and the one they've planned for me. I want time to stop pressing forward until I'm ready to decide."

"Time doesn't stop, Sumi. It just runs out."

"I know." Tears were running down her face now. "I know that. And I'm so tired, Sunil. So tired of lying, of hiding, of feeling like whatever I choose will destroy something I can't afford to lose."

"Then maybe," Sunil said carefully, " maybe you've already chosen and you're just afraid to admit it. Because if you truly wanted us, you'd find a way to fight for it. You'd tell them the truth and deal with the consequences. The fact that you haven't, that you keep finding reasons to wait..."

"That's not fair."

"I know. But it's true."

They were both quiet for a long moment. In the background on his end, she could hear traffic — the night bus maybe, or just the general noise of Coimbatore that never quite went silent.

"My parents will call his parents this week," Sumi said finally. "To say we're interested in moving forward. In a month, maybe less, there'll be talk of engagement. Of fixing a date."

"And when they call, what will you tell them?"

"I don't know."

"Sumi — "

"I don't know," she repeated, voice breaking. "I wish I did. I wish I was brave enough to just tell them and face whatever comes. But every time I think about it, I imagine my father's face when he realizes I've been lying to him for all these years. I imagine my mother crying. I imagine the village gossip, the scandal, the way people will look at them. And I freeze."

"So you'll marry someone else to avoid disappointing them."

"Maybe. I don't know. Maybe that's who I am. Someone who chooses safety and lives with regret rather than someone who fights for what she wants and deals with the fallout."

Sunil was quiet for so long she thought he'd hung up.

"I love you," he said finally, voice raw. "I will always love you. But I can't keep doing this. Can't keep waiting while you decide whether I'm worth fighting for. So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to

give you until the end of next month. If by then you haven't told your parents about us, haven't fought for us in some real way, then I'll know you've chosen. And I'll let you go."

"Sunil — "

"End of June, Sumi. One month. That's all the time I have left to give."

The line went dead.

Sumi sat in the darkness, the phone still pressed to her ear long after the dial tone had died. She felt like she was standing on a ridge with a landslide beginning beneath her feet.

Inside, the house was full of the sound of her father's rattling cough and her mother's soft, hopeful humming as she cleared the dinner plates. One sound was a warning of death; the other was a song of a future that didn't exist.

Thirty days. The hills didn't care about her deadline. The mist didn't care about her heart. They just waited, cold and silent, as the clock began to tick toward the end of May.

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16
The Mango Coloured Silk

June 2007

The proposal from Kattapana moved forward with the terrifying efficiency of a well-oiled machine, each gear turning with the precision of a clock counting down to an inevitable hour.

Joseph's family returned the following Thursday, just four days after the Pennukanal, carrying a box of sweets from the convent bakery in Kattapana and a formal letter of intent on St. Mary's Parish letterhead. They sat in the same chairs on the veranda, drank the same tea, but this time the conversation had shifted from assessment to commitment**.**

"We're very pleased," Joseph senior said, his voice warm with the satisfaction of a man who had found exactly what he wanted and was now simply arranging the details. "Our families share the same parish values. The children seemed comfortable together during the Pennukanal. We'd like to proceed with blessing the union."

Luckachen nodded, his eyes flicking to Sumi who sat beside Ancy, her hands folded so tightly in her lap that her knuckles had turned white. "What timeline are you thinking?"

"We propose engagement in late July. After the monsoon eases and before the festival season becomes too busy." Joseph senior said, pulling out a small notebook already filled with preliminary calculations.

"Wedding in late September or early October, after the monsoon eases, before the harvest season begins. Gives both families time to prepare properly, and allows for the required three Sundays of banns."

Four months.

The number hit Sumi hard enough that she had to sit down before she could answer. Four months from maybe to married. From Sumi who loved Sunil to Mrs. Joseph. It sat on her chest until she could barely breathe.

"That seems reasonable," Luckachen was saying, looking to Ancy for confirmation.

"Very reasonable," Ancy agreed, her voice bright with the relief and hope of a mother who had spent years worrying about this moment. "Enough time to do everything properly."

Sumi said nothing. Just sat with her hands folded in her lap, her face carefully composed, while inside something was screaming so loudly she wondered no one else could hear it. The room felt suddenly too small, the air too thick, the future they were planning for her like a cage being built around her while she sat perfectly still.

When Joseph's family left an hour later, Ancy turned to Sumi with barely contained joy, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "See? I told you he was different. His family is so respectful, so proper. And they're not rushing but also not delaying unnecessarily. This is good, mole. This is very good."

"Yes, Amma," Sumi heard herself say, her voice steady and polite, giving nothing away.

That evening, alone in her room with the door closed, she stared at her phone like it was a grenade with the pin already pulled. Sunil had called twice that afternoon. Now she looked at his name on the screen and felt paralysed — unable to call back, unable to explain, unable to do anything except watch the future narrow into a single path she didn't know how to step off.

She typed a message, Joseph's family came again. They want to move forward quickly. Deleted it before sending. Typed again, I don't know what to do. Deleted that too. Finally sent, Can we talk tomorrow? After I'm free from cooperative work?

His reply came within seconds, simple and steady: Yes. Anytime. Please.

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On Saturday afternoon, while helping with the laundry, Sumi found a folded handkerchief in the pocket of Luckachen's white kurta. She unfolded it, expecting to find cardamom seeds or a field note from the lower fields. Instead, her breath hitched. The fabric was stained with a dry, dark rust — the unmistakable colour of dried blood.

She rushed to Luckachen's office to ask about the medical issue, but the room was empty, the heavy teak furniture standing silent in the afternoon light. Aimlessly, she began searching the desk and, to her horror, found a blister pack of medicine hidden behind a stack of cooperative ledgers.

The office computer hummed, a sterile sound in the heavy teak room. The cursor blinked, a white, clinical heartbeat against the black screen, as the words 'Stage 1 A' and 'surgical removal' confirmed her worst fears. He wasn't just planning a wedding, he was settling a debt with time.

Terrified, she called Priya in Bhubaneswar.

"I found blood, Priya," Sumi whispered, her voice cracking. "And the medicine... it's not for a cough. It's cancer. He's dying, isn't he? And he's hiding it just to get me married."

"Keep it out of your mother's ears," Priya urged, her voice steadying Sumi from hundreds of miles away. "Aunty may not be able to handle this. But Sumi, your father's main focus is your marriage, not even his own life. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know about anything else now," Sumi replied, her voice turning brittle and sharp. "My Papa's health is all that matters."

Sumi found her father standing near the cardamom store, looking out over the terraced hills. She felt a flicker of relief that Ancy was still in the kitchen, out of earshot.

Without a smile or a greeting, she held out the blister pack.

"Papa, I know about the doctor in Ernakulam," she said, her hands trembling. "With this blood and this medication, I know the truth. We need to schedule the surgery at the earliest."

Luckachen turned to her. His eyes were harder than the granite Ittichen coveted.

"A Thuruten does not leave his post in the middle of a battle," he said, his voice flat and final, an army man issuing a field order. "This marriage is my final guard for you. I will not go under a knife until I see you settled with a man who is a perfect match. The surgery is in October. Not a day before."

Sumi stood motionless, the “Thurutel Iron” of his resolve chilling her more than the mountain mist. It was the family’s legendary stubbornness — a cold, crystalline rigidity that Luckachen had forged in the military and tempered through years of defending his forty-two acres against Ittichen. She had spent her life trying to absorb this quality, believing it was a shield meant to protect the Thurutel legacy. But standing there, watching the grey light catch the hardness in his jaw, she realised the iron didn’t just protect the family; it imprisoned her within his vision of it.

Luckachen began to walk back toward the house without looking at her. "Keep it out of your mother's ears," he commanded. "There will be no further discussion on this matter."

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The second visit came the following week, this time with Fr Mathew and the parish secretary, carrying a folder of documents, baptismal certificates, confirmation records, and the preliminary marriage preparation forms required by the diocese.

Fr Mathew spread the papers across Luckachen’s desk, his fingers tracing the seal of the Eparchy of Kattapana. "Everything checks out," he said. "Sumi and Joseph were both baptized and confirmed at St.

Mary's, Kattapana. No canonical impediments. The banns can be published starting July 25th, three Sundays, as required."

He flipped to a calendar marked with red circles around feasible dates. "For the wedding, September 25th is ideal. Saturday, no major feasts. Or October 2nd, if you prefer. Both dates work with the church schedule."

The families discussed all aspects of the nischayam in detail including the guest list.

Sumi said nothing. She sat with folded hands, watching her future being scheduled like a church calendar, while her father hid every trace of exhaustion behind his discipline.

The families discussed back and forth, weighing the September date against the October one, considering monsoon patterns and harvest schedules, the availability of venues and caterers, the colour schemes that would complement the season. Through it all, Sumi sat silent, watching her future being planned with the same detached fascination one might watch a car accident happening in slow motion.

Joseph was there too, he'd come with his family this time. He sat across the room, occasionally catching her eye with small, sympathetic smiles that suggested he understood how overwhelming this all was, how fast it was moving, how little control she had over any of it. At one point, when the elders were deep in calendar consultation, he mouthed across the room: You okay?

She nodded automatically, the practiced smile of someone who had spent years learning how to survive by not making waves. He didn't look convinced, but he didn't push, just gave her a small nod that might have meant I'm here if you need to talk or might have meant nothing at all.

By the time the families finished, dates were set: Engagement July 28th. Wedding September 25th.

Three and a half months.

After Joseph's family left, Ancy pulled Sumi into a tight hug, her voice filled with emotion. "My daughter is getting married," she said, as if she still couldn't quite believe it. "To such a good family. God has blessed us."

Over her mother's shoulder, Sumi saw her father watching her, his expression complex, layered with pride and satisfaction but also something else, something that looked almost like a question, a last chance for her to speak up if something was wrong.

She said nothing.

The moment passed.

Luckachen smiled, came over, touched her head briefly in blessing. "You'll be happy, mole," he said, his voice quiet but firm. "Joseph is a good man. I can see it and don't worry about me."

She looked at her father's satisfied smile and felt a cold void in her chest. If she stayed, she would lose herself. If she left, she would lose him. Either way, she was becoming an orphan of her own choices.

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That night, she called Sunil.

He answered before the first ring finished. "Sumi."

"They set dates," she said without preamble, her voice hollow, as if she was reading from a script she didn't understand. "Engagement July 28th. Wedding September 25th."

Silence on the other end of the line. Then, quietly: "And you said...?"

"I said nothing." Her fingers tightened around the phone. "I sat there and said nothing while they planned my entire future in three and a half months."

"Sumi — "

"I know." Her voice cracked like thin ice underfoot. "I know what you're going to say. That I should tell them. That I should fight. That if I really loved you I'd find a way. I know all of it."

"Then why don't you?" His voice was steady, but she could hear the strain beneath it, the careful control of someone who had been holding themselves together for too long.

"Because I'm a coward." The admission came out raw and honest, the truth she'd been trying not to name.

She was not yet sure about mentioning her father's medical issue. Sunil may take it as an excuse to avoid him.

"Because every time I think about telling them, I imagine my father's face when he realizes I've been lying for all these years. I imagine my mother crying. I imagine becoming the scandal that people whisper about for decades — the girl who shamed her family, who went against everything after they trusted her."

"Sumi, you already told me this. On the rock, remember? Nothing you're saying is new."

"I know it isn't new." Her voice dropped, quieter and harder at once. "That's what's killing me. Nothing's changed except now there's a date on it. July 28th isn't a lie by omission anymore, Sunil. It's a lie with a wedding card attached."

They were both quiet for a long moment. On his end of the line, she could hear the distant hum of traffic, the sound of a world moving forward while they were both stuck in this moment.

"June 21st," Sunil said finally, his voice steady despite everything. "That's what I said. One month to decide."

"And if I can't decide by then?" She already knew the answer, but she needed to hear him say it.

"Then you've decided." His voice was gentle but firm. "You're just too afraid to admit it."

He'd said almost those exact words on the rock, weeks ago. She remembered because she'd hated him a little for it then too, and hated more that he still hadn't been wrong.

The words didn't land like a slap this time. They landed like something she'd been braced for and still hadn't survived. She closed her eyes, pressing the phone to her forehead as if she could somehow change this conversation to have a different ending.

"I have to go," Sunil said before she could respond, his voice rough with emotion he was trying to contain. "Manager is calling."

He didn't finish the sentence this time. No "we'll talk after." No promise of a next conversation at all.

The line went dead.

Sumi sat in the darkness for a long time afterward, the phone still clutched in her hand. The screen flickered and dimmed, leaving her alone with the residue of her father's touch on her head — the warmth of a blessing given to a daughter he no longer truly knew.

She stared at the list of Sunil's missed calls, the glowing numbers a digital tally of a life she was failing to claim. She wanted to call back, to tell him about the blood on the handkerchief and the "Thurutel Iron" that was currently suffocating them both, but her thumb remained frozen over the keypad.

There was no sound in the room except for the slow, rhythmic rotation of the ceiling fan and the distant, wet rattle of her father's cough through the teak walls. Each cough was a reminder that the window for honesty was slamming shut. She didn't move to turn on the light. She simply sat in the silence, watching the small blue light of her mobile blink in the dark — a signal for a rescue she was still too terrified to trigger.

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The next two weeks arrived in a tide of preparations — relatives visiting, visits of goldsmiths, and trips for textile shopping. Sumi moved

through all of it mechanically, saying the right things at the right moments while feeling nothing.

The shift became visceral on a Tuesday afternoon, when few members from bride and groom family met together for shopping at the famous multi store textile firm at MG road Cochin. A group of four sales girls was detailed by the floor manager for the marriage shopping who spread saree samples across the display desk. The room was a riot of colours — vermilion, deep emerald, and a heavy, metallic gold that seemed to pull the light from the windows.

"Look at this one, mole," Ancy whispered, her eyes bright as she lifted a Kanchipuram silk that rustled like dry leaves in a storm. She draped the heavy fabric over Sumi's shoulder, the silk cold and oppressive against her skin. "It's the colour of a ripening mango. It will match the gold jewellery perfectly." And looked the other side for approval from Joseph and his mother, they both smiled together in agreement.

Sumi looked at her reflection in the hallway mirror. The girl staring back was a masterpiece of tradition, draped in six yards of someone else's expectations. She felt the weight of the silk pulling at her shoulder, and behind her, in the mirror, her mother's hands were still adjusting the pleats — small, careful movements, the same way you'd fasten a cage door gently so it doesn't make a sound.

"It's beautiful, Amma," Sumi said, her voice sounding thin and hollow, as if it were traveling through the same mist that was currently swallowing the cardamom rows outside. She had not looked towards Joseph. Many occasions he came to have a chat with her, and she acted busy by searching among sarees.

She stood perfectly still as the merchant pinned the fabric, her body serving as a mannequin for a wedding she was already planning to destroy. In that moment, she realized that the more beautiful they made her look for Joseph, the more jagged the eventual break would be.

She stopped answering Sunil's calls regularly. Couldn't bear his hope sitting next to her own paralysis – the way his voice would catch when he said her name, the pause before he hung up, as if he was leaving one more moment for her to say something else.

"Three days left," he said on June 18th, his voice flat and drained of emotion, just stating fact. "June 21st. That's all I can give you."

"I know," she whispered.

"Have you decided?"

"No."

"Sumi — "

"I'm trying," she said, her voice breaking. "I swear I'm trying. But every time I think I've found the courage, something happens. My mother shows me wedding sarees with tears in her eyes. My father talks about how proud he is of the match. Relatives come and tell me how lucky I am. And I freeze."

"Then maybe," Sunil said carefully, each word landing with its own separate weight, "maybe you're not trying to find courage. Maybe you're looking for a reason not to need it."

The words hit like a slap because they were true. She pressed her palm against her mouth, as if she could somehow keep the sobs from escaping.

"I have to go," Sunil said before she could respond, his voice rough with emotion he couldn't quite contain. "We'll talk after... after the 21st."

The line went dead.

June 19th arrived with rain, not the gentle mist that usually hung over Thopramkudy, but actual heavy rain that drummed on the tin roof and turned the estate paths to mud. Sumi stood on the veranda watching water pour from the sky, feeling like the weather had finally

matched her internal state, stormy and overwhelmed and impossible to ignore.

Ancy came out, draped a shawl over her shoulders. "You'll catch cold standing in the wind."

"I'm okay, Amma."

Ancy was quiet for a moment, standing beside her daughter, watching the rain. "Are you happy, mole?" she asked suddenly, and Sumi could hear how much her mother had pinned on this marriage without meaning to.

The question startled Sumi. "What?"

"About the marriage. About Joseph. Are you happy?"

Sumi's throat closed up. This was her moment. Her chance to tell the truth, to confess everything, to fight for what she wanted before it was too late. She could almost see the words forming in the air between them, could feel the shape of the confession on her tongue.

"I..." she started, then stopped.

Ancy turned to look at her, and Sumi saw something in her mother's eyes, not just hope. It looked closer to desperate need. The need for this to be okay. For her daughter to be settled and safe. For all the worry and planning and social navigation of the past years to have been worth it.

"I'm happy you're happy," Sumi said instead, the coward's answer, the safe one, the words that would keep the peace even as they tasted like betrayal.

Ancy's face relaxed, relief flooding through her like sunlight after rain. She pulled Sumi into a hug, her arms tight with all the love and expectation that Sumi both craved and feared. "That's all I needed to hear," she murmured. "I know it's overwhelming, all the planning, all the relatives, all the decisions. But once you're married, once you settle into life with Joseph, you'll be so happy. I can feel it."

Sumi stood in her mother's arms, feeling like she was betraying everyone. Sunil by not fighting for him, her mother by not being honest, herself by not knowing what she wanted strongly enough to actually choose it, her father by not pressing him to start the treatment sooner.

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17
The Leap of Faith

August 2007

Sumi left the kitchen and walked straight down through the wet grass to the cardamom shed. “I'm happy you're happy.” The words were still in her mouth, sour as unripe fruit. She had said them so easily. That was the part that frightened her.

The cardamom shed smelled of dried clay and slow roasted spice and rain that hadn't fallen yet. Mattaikochu was there before dawn, the way he always was, stringing the green seeds onto jute twine with hands that had done it so many times they no longer needed his eyes.

Sumi sat on the upturned crate she'd sat on since she was six years old, watching him work.

"You should be inside," he said, not looking up. "Your mother will ask where you've gone."

"She always asks. I never have a good answer."

He smiled at that, the smile he kept for her alone, the one that had nothing of Luckachen's discipline in it.

She turned cardamom seeds over in her fingers, not really seeing it. "Mattaikochu. How long have you and Aniyamma been married?"

His hands paused, just for a second, on the twine. "Twenty-two years this October"

"Twenty-two years." She said it like a number too large to hold. "Did you love her? When it started, I mean. Before."

"Love." He said the word the way he said the names of old trees — carefully, like something that had earned its weight. "No. I did not love her when it started, because I had never met her or known her. My father and her father knew each other. That was the whole of it."

"Then when did you know? That it was, that she was." Sumi stopped, unable to finish.

Mattaikochu set the twine down and looked at her properly for the first time. In the grey light his eyes were the same colour as the mist over the ridge.

"You are asking me the wrong question, mole."

"What's the right one?"

"You are asking me when I found love. That is not how it comes. I will tell you something my own father told me, the night before my own wedding, when I was as frightened as you are now, though you are hiding it better than I did."

He sat down across from her, on the sack of dried seeds, and for a while he said nothing, as if deciding whether she was ready enough to be given it.

"When something breaks between two people," he said at last, "there are always four stories.

The man has his story, and to him it is the truth. The woman has her story, and to her it is the truth. Then there is the third story, the one the village makes, the one the church makes, the one the family makes when the two people will not speak. In that story, truth does not matter at all. Only shame matters. Only who looks good and who looks bad."

Sumi was very still.

"And the fourth story," Mattaikochu went on, "is the only one that is ever real. It is the truth that is only possible if the two people sit down and tell it together — his half and her half, side by side, until it becomes one thing instead of two. Most people never reach it. It is easier to keep your own truth. It is easier to let the third story win, because then no one has to say anything at all."

"Did you and Aniyamma reach it?"

"Yes," he said. "A few months after our marriage, I struck her once in anger and did not speak for nine days out of sheer shame. I really thought the marriage was over. But, we sat, like this, on sacks, in the dark, because that is where truth goes to hide, and we told it together. Not my story. Not her story. The one we both understood."

He picked the twine back up, but his eyes stayed on her.

"That is love, mole. Not the beginning. The fourth story. Everything before that is just two people guessing at each other. Your father had done a great search to find this match."

Sumi sat with that for a long time, the seeds still in her lap. She thought of Papa's version of this story, and Amma's, two truths that had nothing to do with what she actually felt, both of them already treated like settled fact. Neither one was hers to keep.

She stood, brushing the cardamom dust from her skirt, and for the first time in weeks her hands were steady. There was only one person she wanted sitting across from her when she finally told this. She already knew who.

"Mattaikocheeta. Thank you."

Mattaikochu did not reply, just smiled back at her.

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Priya called on the next Sunday evening. She'd come home for a short break after her first semester at the Institute of Physics, her voice carrying the familiar warmth of someone who had known Sumi long enough to see through her carefully constructed masks.

"I heard," Priya said without preamble. "About the dates being set."

"From who?" Sumi asked, though she already knew the answer.

"From Giri. Who heard from someone at the bank who heard from Fr Mathew." There was a pause, the kind that only comes between people who don't need to fill silence with words. "Village gossip travels faster than phone calls."

"Talk to me," Priya said gently. "Really talk. What's happening in your head?"

And so Sumi did. Sitting in her room with the door closed, the rain drumming a steady rhythm against the windows, she told Priya everything she'd been too afraid to tell anyone else. About loving Sunil but being paralyzed by fear. About Joseph being genuinely good but wrong in ways she couldn't articulate. About feeling trapped between two futures, each one requiring her to destroy something precious. About Sunil's ultimatum and her own cowardice and the way time kept moving forward whether she was ready or not.

Priya listened without interrupting, her silence the kind that makes you feel heard rather than judged. When Sumi finally fell silent saying "If I stay, I lose Sunil. If I go, I lose Papa. Either way, I'm an orphan of my own choices."

Priya was quiet for a long moment, quiet in the way that leaves room for all the things that can't be said in words.

"You aren't choosing between men, Sumi. You're choosing between being a daughter who is a 'prize' and a woman who is a 'person.' One version of you has to die for the other to live"

"It is so hard, I know, but time is at a premium now — for you, for Sunil, and for Luckachen Uncle. We are here to help you, but the decision is yours."

"Giri told me something last week," she said finally, her voice careful but not hesitant. "He said if you decided you wanted to leave, if you wanted to marry Sunil instead of Joseph, he would help. That he'd already worked out a plan. Registration office in Thodupuzha, witnesses, everything arranged."

Priya was not expecting any response from the other end.

"He said he wouldn't push you," Priya continued, her voice steady. "Wouldn't try to convince you. But if you decided, if you chose, the option was there. Court marriage. Small ceremony. No big fuss. Just you and Sunil making it legal before your family could stop it."

Sumi felt her heart hammer against her ribs, the way it always did when she thought about actually making a choice. "What?"

"That's..." Sumi swallowed hard. "That's elopement. That destroys families and you know about Papa's health."

"Yes," Priya agreed, her voice gentle but unflinching. "It is. It would break your parents' hearts. Create scandal. Make village gossip explode for years. Probably damage your father's health further. It would be terrible in all those ways."

"Then why are you even mentioning it?" Sumi's voice was barely above a whisper, the question hanging between them like the rain-soaked air.

"Because it's an option, Sumi. Maybe the only one that gets you to Sunil at all."

"It's not the elopement that scares me, it's how can I do it behind their backs? Papa is making the invitation list. Amma's picking out sarees for a wedding, and they keep asking me for my opinion on all of it."

Priya didn't interrupt. She knew, maybe for the first time, that Sumi was actually thinking this through out loud instead of just reacting.

"How can I let them find out something like that about their own daughter and that too, from someone else?"

"Then what do you want?"

"I don't know yet." She pressed her palm against the cold window glass. "I really want to be the one who tells them. But I feel like the time for them to hear their daughter's truth has already passed."

"That sounds harder than what we're talking about," Priya cut in. "And it may not even matter once your father finds out on his own."

"I know." Her voice cracked, but it didn't waver. "I don't know if I have that kind of courage. I know what I want now. I just don't know if I can stand in front of Papa and say it out loud."

"Then don't start with him," Priya said gently. "Start with yourself. Do you love Sunil?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to marry Joseph?"

"No." The word came out before she could stop it, raw and true. "But I could build a life with him. Could probably be content. Happy even, eventually."

"Content isn't the same as choosing what you actually want," Priya said gently, and the truth of it settled in Sumi's chest and didn't move.

"I know," Sumi whispered.

They were quiet for a long moment, the rain and the darkness wrapping around them like a cocoon. "June 21st," Priya said finally. "That's Sunil's deadline, right?"

"Yes."

"Then you have a few days to decide who you want to be," Priya said, her voice carrying the weight of someone who had already made her own hard choices. "The girl who does what's expected and lives with what-ifs, or the girl who fights for what she wants and deals with the consequences."

After they hung up, Sumi sat in the dark for hours, the rain drumming a steady rhythm against the windows, her mind going in circles that led nowhere and everywhere at once.

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Joseph's phone call came at 7:30 PM, just as Sumi was sitting on the veranda, watching the rain turn the estate paths to mud.

"Hi," he said when she answered, his voice careful. "Is this a good time?"

"Sure."

"I wanted to check in. See how you're doing with all the planning. I know it's overwhelming."

"It's... a lot," she admitted.

They talked for a few minutes — about venue options, menu tastings, the absurdity of planning a life together when they barely knew each other. Then Joseph's voice changed, became serious.

"Sumi, can I ask you something directly?"

Her stomach tightened. "Okay."

"Are you having second thoughts? Because if you are, you should say something. Now, before things go further."

The question hung in the air. This was it. Her chance to be honest. To tell him about Sunil, about the stolen moments and hidden love since college, about the fear that had kept her silent.

"Why do you ask?" she said instead.

"Because I'd rather know now than find out later that you married me while wishing you hadn't."

Sumi felt tears prick her eyes. Even now, Joseph was being decent. Giving her an out. Making it easy to be honest.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," she said finally.

"Sometimes hurt is unavoidable," he said gently. "The question is whether you cause it now with honesty or later with regret."

She was quiet for a long moment. "I'll think about it," she said.

"Take tonight," Joseph said. "But Sumi, if you're not sure, tell your parents. Tell them the truth. Because I could build a good life with you. But only if you actually want to build it with me."

After he hung up, Sumi sat staring at her phone until the screen went dark on its own.

Even Joseph, the safe choice, the one who was supposed to make everything easy, was asking her to be brave.

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The phone felt like a hot coal in her hand after Joseph hung up. Sumi slipped out of the house, her bare feet finding the familiar, muddy

path to the rock overlooking the valley. The rain had softened to a whisper, leaving the High Range air so sharp it felt like breathing glass.

She sat on the cold stone, the same place where she had spoken to Sunil weeks ago, but tonight the valley offered no comfort.

She looked at her hands in the moonlight. They were stained, not with the dark rust of the blood she had found on her father's handkerchief, but with the green essence of cardamom pods from the afternoon's sorting. She tried to rub the scent away against the rough granite, but it was buried in her pores. It was the smell of Thopramkudy. It was the smell of her father's sweat and his forty-two acres of unbending pride.

I am going to kill him, she thought. The sentence didn't come with tears; it came with a cold, hollow thud in her chest.

She wasn't thinking of Sunil's small apartment in Coimbatore or the life of a bank manager's wife. She was thinking of her father's "Thurutel Iron" — that cold, crystalline stubbornness she had watched him wield like a bayonet for years. It was the iron that had kept Luckachen's back straight when the quarry blasts shook their windows. It was the quality she had spent her life trying to absorb, believing it was a shield built to protect the family legacy. She had admired it in the cooperative meetings when he refused to yield an inch to Ittichen.

But tonight, the realization was a bitter poison: the iron wasn't just a shield. It was a blade.

She understood now that Luckachen wasn't the only one who possessed it. She too had.

It was the ultimate tragedy of their bloodline. He was using his iron to stay in these hills and die for a wedding she didn't want; she was now forced to use her own iron to leave him and survive a life he hadn't planned.

The Thurutel Iron wasn't just a metaphor for stubbornness anymore; it was the gate she was about to slam shut and she could already feel how heavy that would be. She wasn't running to Sunil because she was weak or because she was "dreaming." She was running because she was

strong enough to survive being hated by the only people she had ever loved.

If she stayed, she would be the 'Prize', the perfect Thurutel daughter, the partner to a Mahindra dealer, the woman who kept the oak standing. She would have the gold around her neck, the respect of the parish, and a father who lived because he had finally "won." But she would be a ghost inhabiting a beautiful salwar.

If she left, she would be a "Person." But that person would be born from the wreckage of her parent's heart.

She remembered the way Mattaikochu looked at her, the absolute, unwavering loyalty of a man who saw her as the future of these hills. She was about to turn that loyalty into a village scandal.

She remembered Sunil's deadline: June 21st.

She realised then that her fear wasn't about being poor or the scandal at the church. It was the realisation that she was exactly like Luckachen. He was willing to die for his version of her future. And she... she was willing to destroy him for hers.

She stood up, her legs trembling so violently she had to grip the rough edge of the rock until the stone bit into her skin. She didn't look back at the lights of the farmhouse.

"I'm sorry, Papa," she whispered, but the wind took the words and scattered them over the dark ridge where Ittichen's lights burned in a mocking vigil.

She pulled out the phone. She didn't call Sunil. She didn't call Priya. She just stared at the screen until the light timed out, leaving her in total darkness. She had made the choice. She would pay the price. And the price was that she would never be able to come home to these hills again.

****

The house slept around her, but Sumi lay awake, the ceiling fan's slow rotation casting shifting shadows like her own restless thoughts.

Everyone was asking her to choose. Sunil's deadline loomed, June 21st, the day she'd either find her courage or lose him forever.

Her father's cough rattled through the walls — that deep, wet sound that had been getting worse, that made her mother's footsteps quicken in the kitchen each morning. Outside, the rain had softened to a whisper against the windows, as if the night itself was holding its breath.

Her mind raced through the faces that haunted her. Sunil in Palakkad, probably staring at his phone, wondering if she'd call, Joseph in Kattapana, being decent even as she lied to him by omission. Her parents sleeping nearby, dreaming of a wedding they'd be proud of. The girl she'd been a few years ago, who had believed love was enough, where had she gone?

When had fear become stronger than hope?

Her phone glowed in the dark. She typed: I need to talk to you. Tomorrow. Can we meet at cooperative bank? 10 AM?

She stared at the message until the words blurred. Then sent it before courage could fail.

Not to Sunil.

To Giri.

His reply came within minutes, I'll be there. Whatever you need.

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Sumi woke to her father's cough, harsher than usual. She lay still, listening to her mother's footsteps in the kitchen, the sound of water being heated, the low murmur of concerned voices.

She should get up. Should help. Should be the good daughter. But she remained paralyzed, staring at the ceiling where the fan cast its slow, hypnotic shadows.

Today was Sunil's deadline. Today she'd either tell her parents the truth or watch the last possibility of choosing him slip away forever.

At 6:30 AM, she sent a message to Giri, Thank you. See you at ten.

Then she opened Sunil's messages. His last one read: June 21st. That's all I can give you.

She typed, I'm trying. Please believe I'm trying.

Deleted it.

I love you. I'm sorry I'm not braver.

Deleted that.

Finally sent, Today. I'll have an answer today.

His reply was instant, Okay.

One word. No pressure. Just acknowledgment that today everything would change.

She dressed mechanically in her old salwar, avoiding the new wedding ones. In the mirror, her face looked tired. Scared. But maybe that was enough.

Downstairs, Ancy was preparing kashayam. "You're up early, mole," she said without turning.

"Couldn't sleep," Sumi replied, her throat tight.

Ancy's concern was palpable. "Not feeling sick?"

"No. Just... thinking."

"About the wedding?" Ancy smiled. "It's overwhelming, I know. But we'll handle everything."

Happy. The word tasted like ash.

"I'm going to church to meet Fr Mathew," Sumi said carefully, before she got out of house at 9:30 AM. "Then the cooperative bank. Some work is delayed."

Ancy's expression softened. "That's sweet of you. Pray for your father's health."

The lies came easier than truth.

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Giri and Priya were waiting at the bank entrance, when Sumi arrived, their faces carefully neutral. They moved to a nearby tea stall, the scent of chai and damp paper filling the air.

Priya broke the silence not with pleasantries but with a hard-hitting truth with no regrets: “But Sumi, there is something you don't know about the 'plain' world you are running to. Sunil... he was offered a promotion to Madurai last month. Deputy Manager. It would have cleared his family's financial issues. He turned it down. He chose to stay in that sweating rural branch just to be near you for this one month."

"He gave that up? For me?" Sumi’s hands were trembling when the words came out.

Giri interrupted "He did. But don't mention this to him when you see him. He doesn't want you choosing him out of debt or pity. He wants you to choose him because he is your future, not because of his sacrifice."

"We're prepared," Giri said quietly and explained the plan. "Friday morning, start early for church, and the church road will be sparse. I'll be waiting at the road junction and if you are ready, we'll go to Thodupuzha and Sunil will be there."

Sumi traced the condensation on her glass. "And if I'm not ready?"

"Then we never had this conversation," Priya said gently. "But you need to decide before the banns are published. After that, the choice won't be yours anymore."

Giri studied her face. "Do you know what you want?"

"I don't know," Sumi admitted. "I thought I'd wake up today with clarity. But I'm still trapped between what I want and what I'm afraid to lose."

She told them everything, her mother's joy, her father's medical condition and pride he clung to, Joseph's kindness, Sunil's ultimatum. It came all out at once, more than either of them expected.

"Joseph gave me an opening," she finished. "But honest about what? That I've been lying all these years?"

"Or that you're not ready for marriage," Giri said. "You don't have to tell them about Sunil. Just that you need more time."

"And then?" Sumi asked. "They'll just find someone else."

"But it gives you time," Priya said. "To figure out what you actually want, but knowing your father he will not be ready for any treatment before what he decided for you happens."

Sumi was still hesitant "But how can I leave? You know his condition. The blood, the 'shadow'. If I leave, I am breaking a man who is already falling."

Priya interrupted "Think clearly, dear. Why is he refusing surgery? Because he is guarding you. He is using his own life as a shield to get you to that altar with Joseph. If you leave, his 'shield' has nothing left to protect but Aunty. He will be forced to put down the iron and go to the hospital. You aren't deserting him; you are removing the only reason he has for dying."

"And Amma? She will be alone in that house with a sick man." Sumi was not able to stop herself.

"Aunty is stronger than you think. But she cannot save him while he is fighting this 'battle' for your marriage. Your decision forces a new reality on everyone." Priya's words were firm.

Sumi sat in silence of confusion.

The plan was real. Concrete. Not theoretical anymore.

"And afterward?" Sumi asked. "When my parents realise I'm gone?"

"There will be anger," Giri said honestly. "But it's your choice. And if you choose Sunil, we'll help you face the consequences."

Sumi closed her eyes. "I need to call Sunil."

Using Giri's phone, Sumi dialled Sunil's number. His voice was careful when he answered.

"I'm with Giri and Priya," she said. "We're talking about options."

Silence. Then: "What kind of options?"

"Friday morning," she whispered. "Church gate. If I choose, we go to Thodupuzha."

The silence stretched like the distance between them.

"And have you decided?" His voice was steady, but she heard the ocean beneath it.

"No," she admitted. "I need to know, can we survive the storm after?"

"I can't promise it'll be easy," he said. "But I can promise you this: twenty years from now, you won't be wondering 'what if'."

The tears came then, hot and silent. "I'm so scared."

"Being scared isn't the enemy," he said softly. "It's just the price of choosing yourself."

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The tea had gone cold. The world moved around them, life going on as if nothing was ending and beginning all at once.

She thought about her father teaching her about the cooperative, trusting her with real responsibility, looking at her with pride. Thought about that trust shattering when he learned she'd been lying all these years.

She thought about her mother planning a wedding with such joy, finally seeing her daughter settled and safe. Thought about that joy turning to tears and shame when neighbours whispered.

She thought about Joseph being unexpectedly decent, giving her an out, not deserving to be humiliated by a bride who chose someone else at the last moment.

She thought about all the hurt she'd cause. All the relationships damaged. All the trust is broken.

And then she thought about Sunil.

About the first time they'd talked over tea at the canteen, when something in her chest had recognized something in him. Many years of phone calls and stolen moments and careful hiding because of what they had felt worth protecting even when it couldn't be spoken aloud.

About the way he'd worked himself exhausted trying to build a future for them. About the ultimatum he'd finally given not because he didn't love her but because he loved himself enough to not wait forever for someone who might never choose him.

About what Priya had said: Content isn't the same as choosing what you actually want.

She thought about being seventy years old, looking back at this moment.

Which version of herself would she rather be? The woman who'd been brave enough to choose what she wanted even when it was hard? Or the woman who'd taken the safe path and spent fifty years wondering what if?

The answer came quietly. Not with trumpets or divine intervention. Just a simple, clear knowing.

She knew which hurt she could carry.

She knew which version of herself, she could live with.

Her fingers trembled as she typed to Giri: "Before mass Friday. Church gate. I will be there."

The rain had stopped. Somewhere, a crow called — harsh and clear as truth.

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Friday came.

She was ready to go for the Holy Mass a little earlier than usual. Fighting to keep her face steady, she kissed Papa on the cheek and hugged Amma. Then she set out on that familiar walk — taking the same path she had walked since childhood, her mind heavy with memories.

When she was about to reach the church compound, Giri was waiting near the gate, standing beside a Maruti 800, hands in his pockets, expression careful.

She saw him.

She stopped.

For a long moment, neither moved.

Then she walked towards him. Without saying anything she got inside the car as if she were still in some dreams.

Giri on entering the car looked at Sumi. "Are you still sure?"

"Ask me again in ten minutes and I might say no," Sumi said. "So let's move before I lose my nerve."

The mist was thin that morning.

The hills watched.

And somewhere in the distance, the world waited for her choice.

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That same morning in Thopramkudy, the house felt strangely quiet.

Sumi usually returned from Friday mass by 9:30 AM, walked the short path home, joined her parents for tea, talked about the cooperative or the fields.

9:30 came and went.

9:45.

10:00.

The mist was lifting, but the tightness in Luckachen's chest was not.

He waited another fifteen minutes, then turned to Mattaikochu, who was polishing the Scorpio nearby.

"Drive me to the church," Luckachen said, voice low and strained. "I can't drive myself today."

Mattaikochu looked up, saw the fear in Luckachen's face, and nodded without question.

They drove fast.

When they reached the church, Luckachen stepped out before the vehicle had fully stopped.

Fr Mathew was coming out of the parish house.

Luckachen saw him and moved forward quickly, voice louder than he intended.

"Father! Have you seen Sumi?"

Fr Mathew stopped, confused, then hurried toward him.

"What happened, Luckachen?"

"Sumi is not yet back home. It has been almost two hours since mass ended."

Fr Mathew's face changed — surprise, then concern.

"She was not here for mass," he said quietly. "I noticed. Friday mass, she never misses it since college days. I was surprised too."

Luckachen's mind fractured.

So many thoughts collided at once.

Had Ittichen's men done something? Revenge? A warning? The accident with the son was still fresh in the village memory. Had they taken her to hurt him?

His voice trembled when he spoke.

"Father… what should I do? Where should I look for my daughter? Has anything happened to her?"

Mattaikochu was already dialling numbers — workers, relatives, the milk booth Joby, anyone who might have seen her on the path. He drove off in the vehicle a moment later from the church compound.

Fr Mathew placed a hand on Luckachen's arm, trying to steady him.

"Calm down, Luckachen. We'll find her. She may have stopped somewhere. Let's check."

Luckachen's cough started then — dry, harsh, deeper than before. He pressed his palm to his chest, throat feeling raw.

"Tea," he managed. "I need tea."

Fr Mathew nodded to a helper who ran inside.

Luckachen sat on the church veranda, tired, breathing hard, the cough coming in waves.

Ancy kept calling.

He handed the phone to Fr Mathew.

The priest moved away, spoke in a low voice.

The only thing audible was: "Nothing to worry... she is fine... all will be okay..."

Mattaikochu came back with the vehicle, rushing, face pale.

"Ichaaya!" he shouted while getting down.

Fr Mathew and Luckachen rushed toward him.

"What?"

Mattaikochu's voice shook.

"The milk booth Joby... he saw Sumi this morning. She joined Giri in a vehicle near the church gate. They drove away together."

The words landed like a stone in still water.

In Thopramkudy, the milk booth was the ear of the hills. Joby didn't just sell milk; he collected movements. When he told Mattaikochu

about the Maruti 800, the secret wasn't just Sumi's anymore, it belonged to the whole village.

Luckachen stood frozen.

Luckachen tried to call her name, but the air wouldn't come. He gripped the church railing until his knuckles turned white, the "Thurutel Iron" finally giving way at the sight of his daughter's empty mass chair.

But the hills were still holding their breath.

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18
Curry Leaves in a Sambar

August 2007

Luckachen's face went completely still — not blank, but frozen, as if something inside him had stopped moving. His eyes, usually so controlled, so military-precise in their assessment, showed something raw breaking through the surface. The cough that had been plaguing him all morning suddenly felt like nothing compared to this new pain.

"Drive me to Thodupuzha," he said to Mattaikochu, his voice flat and final.

He walked toward the Scorpio with measured steps, back straight despite the cough that had been tearing at his chest all morning. Each breath felt like dragging air through broken glass, but he would not let it show. Not now. Not when whatever control he had left was the only thing keeping him upright.

Mattaikochu drove fast — faster than he usually did, faster than what was safe on these winding hill roads. The Scorpio's engine roared as they descended from Thopramkudy's heights toward the lowlands, the landscape changing from cardamom terraces to rubber plantations to the scattered buildings that marked Thodupuzha's outskirts.

Luckachen sat in the passenger seat, his hands clenched in his lap so tightly that his knuckles had gone white. The cough came in short, harsh bursts that he tried to suppress, each one sending pain radiating through his chest. He tasted copper in his mouth, blood, probably, but he swallowed it back. There would be time for weakness later. Right now, he needed to see this through.

He did not speak the entire way.

His mind was a storm he couldn't control.

She had been lying to him for all these years. While he taught her about the cooperative, while he trusted her with real responsibility, while he looked at her with pride and thought this is my partner, this is my daughter becoming someone remarkable — all that time, she had been carrying on with some boy. Hiding it. Deceiving him.

Every evening they'd spent on the veranda discussing worker shares and planting schedules now felt tainted. Every piece of advice she'd given, every strategic insight she'd offered — all of it happening while she maintained this massive deception.

He had rejected three proposals for her. Good families. Respectable matches. He had told those families that his daughter deserved better, that she needed someone who would value her intelligence and partnership.

And all along, she had already chosen.

Chosen someone she'd kept hidden.

Chosen to marry in secret rather than face him honestly.

The betrayal sat in his chest heavier than the cancer, heavier than the cough that was getting worse by the day.

The sub-registration office came into view, a modest two-story building with white-washed walls starting to yellow, a faded sign above the entrance, a small courtyard where a few people waited on benches under a struggling neem tree. Luckachen knew this building well. He'd been here dozens of times over the years for cooperative business. The familiarity of it made the betrayal cut deeper.

Mattaikochu parked the Scorpio in the small lot beside the building.

Luckachen stepped out before the vehicle had fully stopped.

He walked towards the entrance with measured steps, his military training keeping his posture straight despite the pain in his chest. The clerk at the reception counter started to speak, then thought better of it when he saw Luckachen's expression.

The corridor inside smelled of old files and phenyl, the fluorescent lights humming overhead. Luckachen knew where the registrar's office was. He'd been there before, had sat in those same chairs while waiting for documents to be processed. The irony wasn't lost on him.

The door was half-open.

He could hear voices inside, the registrar's measured tones reading something official, the kind of formal language that turned human decisions into legal facts.

He walked closer.

And through the gap in the door, he saw her.

Sumi stood beside a young man he didn't recognise — tall, decent-looking, ordinary man, wearing a simple shirt that looked like it had been ironed in a hurry. His hair was slightly dishevelled, as if he'd just gotten off a bus. He held Sumi's hand, not dramatically, but with a quiet possessiveness that made Luckachen's stomach clench. He lacked the "Iron" of the Thurutel line.

Sumi wore a new salwar, pale green, simple but clearly purchased for this occasion. Her hair was tied back neatly. She looked nervous, scared even, but also determined in a way Luckachen had never seen before. She looked like someone who had made a choice and was living with it.

The registrar was speaking, his voice carrying the particular drone of bureaucratic ceremony: “do you, Sumi, daughter of Luckachen, accept this marriage of your own free will and consent?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely audible, but firm.

The registrar made a notation in his register. Luckachen heard the sound before he saw the act.

The thud of the government stamp echoed in the narrow corridor. To Luckachen, it wasn't just ink hitting paper; it was the sound of the gate slamming shut on the only future he had ever built for her.

"By the authority vested in me by the Government of Kerala, I hereby declare you legally married."

The boy, Sunil, pulled out a small ring from his pocket. Simple gold, nothing elaborate. He slid it onto Sumi's finger with hands that trembled slightly.

Luckachen stood frozen in the doorway, unseen. His daughter. His mole. With Giri. Driving away. Without a word. Without permission. Without ...

He watched his daughter become someone else's wife.

He watched the life he'd imagined for her, the proper wedding at the church, Fr Mathew blessing the union, the whole village witnessing, his family's honour maintained, disappear in the space of a stamp falling.

The mist had lifted completely, revealing the hills in stark relief. But Luckachen felt like he was drowning.

He did not go inside.

He did not speak.

Every instinct drilled into him during eighteen years in the army, every lesson about maintaining composure under fire, every bit of discipline he had learned about hiding emotion when the world was falling apart — all of it held him still, kept him quiet.

He could have walked in.

Could have stopped it — was there still time? Could a marriage be invalidated if a parent objected immediately? He didn't know the law well enough to be certain.

But what would be the point?

The ring was already on her finger.

The register was already signed.

The choice was already made.

He had raised her to think independently, to make strategic decisions, to see possibilities others missed.

And she had used all those skills to deceive him.

After a long moment that felt like hours, Luckachen turned.

He walked back down the corridor, same measured steps, same military precision, back straight despite the pain in his chest.

Outside, the morning had grown hot. The sun burned down on the courtyard where people still waited for their turn with bureaucracy.

Mattaikochu was standing beside the Scorpio.

"Ichaaya?"

Luckachen climbed into the passenger seat without a word.

Mattaikochu had not followed Luckachen. He stood beside the Scorpio, certain the Thurutel Iron would prevail and the gate could still be closed. He was wrong. But dread had drawn him inside. By the time he reached the registrar's doorway, the stamp had already fallen.

What Mattaikochu heard was the registrar words, "Giri, give my regards to your uncle."

Mattaikochu was not able to resist himself, he called out loudly.

"Mole..."

The word cut through the room and made everyone turn towards the door.

Mattaikochu was standing at the door, with wet tears, that he didn't bother to hide.

"Papa is waiting outside," he choked out.

The smiles vanished. Fear took their place.

Giri stepped forward, placing himself between Mattaikochu and others. With a steady voice.

"Mattaikochu Chetta, look at me. This isn't a crime. It's love. Two people choosing each other, no matter what the world says. You know Sumi. We know Sunil. They've fought for this, not just against her family, but against every possible odds. And you, of all people, know Luckachen Uncle isn't a man who bends to tradition or threats. He's a man who respects courage. Today, we showed him what that looks like."

Giri raised his voice just enough for it to carry past Mattaikochu, past the Scorpio, straight to Luckachen.

"If he wants to be angry, let him be angry at me. But he'll have to admit this: they stood up for what they believed in. And so did I."

Inside the Scorpio, Luckachen sat motionless, the eyes, held the pain of a father betrayed. Giri's words sounded like a lecture from a boy who doesn't understand the "Iron" he is claiming to have.

Sumi stared back, tears streaming down her face. Luckachen didn't shout. Didn't curse. Didn't threaten. Just looked at her, his silence heavier than any storm.

A smaller man would have raged.

Luckachen pointed at Giri.

"I will see you."

Scorpio pulled away, disappearing into the traffic.

They left Thodupuzha behind, the small town with its government buildings and ordinary Friday morning traffic, where life continued normally for everyone except them.

Neither spoke.

The cough came again, deeper now, more painful, bringing up something dark that Luckachen swallowed back. He tasted blood more strongly now, metallic and warm. His hand went to his chest where the cancer sat like a weight, where the tightness was getting worse day by day.

The scan results hidden in his desk drawer felt like prophecy now. Three to six months before Stage 1 became Stage 2. Time running out to see his daughter married properly.

Except she was married now.

Just not the way he'd imagined.

They climbed back into the hills. The landscape reversing its earlier transformation, rubber giving way to cardamom, lowland humidity giving way to mountain coolness, the mist beginning to gather again even though it was barely afternoon.

When they reached the estate, the workers in the fields looked up. Some waved, then stopped mid-gesture when they saw Luckachen's face.

Word would spread fast.

In a place like Thopramkudy, secrets lasted about as long as morning mist.

By evening, everyone would know.

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Luckachen sat on the veranda, what he'd seen sitting down on him the way the monsoon clouds were sitting over the ridge. Fr Mathew who was at his home, sat beside him, silent, knowing there were no words that could ease this kind of pain.

Ancy came out of the house, her face pale. She didn't need to ask what had happened. The answer was written in Luckachen's posture, in the way he wouldn't meet her eyes.

“She did it?" Ancy whispered. "She actually married him?"

Luckachen nodded once.

"You saw them?"

Another nod.

Ancy's hands went to her mouth, pressing hard as if to hold back sound. Her shoulders started to shake. Luckachen reached out instinctively, then stopped. His hand hung in the air between them for a moment before falling back to his side.

The silence stretched between them, heavy with all the things they couldn't say.

"She didn't even tell us," Ancy said finally, her voice breaking. "She didn't even say goodbye."

The words cracked something in Luckachen's chest. He sat down heavily in his usual chair, his body feeling suddenly too heavy, his breath coming in ragged gasps as the cough rattled in his chest.

Ancy lowered her hands slowly. Her eyes were dry. He could not tell whether this meant she felt nothing, or whether the feeling was too large for tears yet.

"She didn't," he said.

The cough came again, violent this time, tearing at his chest, making his whole body shake. He pressed his palm to his mouth, felt wetness, looked down to see blood on his hand.

Not much. Just flecks. But more than before.

Ancy saw it.

She didn't cry out. Didn't panic. Didn't ask the questions she should have asked months ago when the cough first started.

She simply went inside, brought a steel tumbler of water, and placed it beside him.

Then she sat on the floor near his feet — the way she had sat near her own father when he was dying of tuberculosis, the way women in her family had always sat when the world became too heavy to face standing up.

She rested her head against his knee.

They stayed like that as the afternoon faded into evening.

As the workers finished their shifts and headed home, casting worried glances toward the house.

As the mist thickened and wrapped the estate in white silence.

As the lights across the valley began to glow – scattered pinpoints in the gathering dark, other families sitting down to dinner, other lives continuing normally.

Neither of them ate that night.

That evening, Mattaikochu sat on the veranda with the maid, his voice breaking as he tried to make sense of what had happened.

"These days kids have no understanding of real love," he said, his voice rough. "They just throw away parents like curry leaf from sambar when they find affection with someone else."

The maid paused in her work, listening.

"They don't understand it's the parents who brought all the taste and colour into their life. The parents who made everything good, everything worth having. And now someone else has joined, and suddenly the parents are useless. Like curry leaf. You use it to make the sambar good, make it beautiful, give it flavour. But once the sambar is ready, you just throw the curry leaf away. Useless."

His voice cracked on the last word.

Inside, Ancy had come to the kitchen doorway. She'd heard every word. She stood very still, hand on the doorframe, as the truth of what he'd said settled into her chest.

Curry leaf.

That's what they were now.

Used to give flavour, to add colour, to make their daughter into someone worth loving.

Then discarded.

Thrown away.

Her eyes filled with tears, the first real tears since that first day, tears that came from somewhere deeper than shock, deeper than hurt.

She looked out the window toward the ridge where the mist was gathering again.

And she whispered, so softly only she could hear:

"Curry leaf..."

Mattaikochu settled onto the veranda himself, not going home to his own family, not leaving them alone with this grief.

The night deepened.

Inside the house, Ancy finally moved.

She stood slowly, knees aching from sitting on the floor, and touched Luckachen's shoulder.

"Come inside," she said softly. "You need to rest."

He didn't respond.

"Please," she added. "Whatever has happened, you're still sick. The cough is getting worse. You need to lie down."

At that, he looked up at her.

In the dim light from the single bulb they'd turned on, she saw his eyes — red-rimmed, exhausted —carrying a weight she'd never seen before.

"I failed," he said simply.

"What?"

"I failed as a father. I trusted her. Treated her like a partner. And she used that trust to deceive me. For years."

"You didn't fail — "

"Then why did she hide it?" His voice rose slightly, not loud, but intense. "If I was the kind of father she could trust, why didn't she tell

me? Why didn't she come to me and say 'Papa, there's someone I care about, I want you to meet him'?"

Ancy had no answer.

Because she'd been asking herself the same question since Fr Mathew brought the news.

What had they done wrong?

How had they raised a daughter who would rather elope than face them honestly?

"Maybe," Ancy said slowly, choosing words carefully, "maybe she was afraid. Not of us exactly, but of... disappointing us. Of not living up to what we wanted for her."

"What did we want except her happiness?" Luckachen's voice broke. "Everything I did, building the cooperative, protecting the land from Ittichen, trying to create something worth inheriting, all of it was for her future. And she threw it away for some boy we've never even met."

The cough came again, harder this time.

Ancy knelt beside him, hand on his back, feeling the way his whole body shook with each spasm.

When it finally subsided, she said quietly:

"Come inside. Please. We can't solve this tonight. We can't change what's already happened. But you need rest."

Luckachen let her help him up.

They went inside together, leaving the veranda empty for the first time in memory without checking the locks, without the usual nighttime routine.

In the bedroom, Luckachen sat on the edge of the bed while Ancy brought him water and the cough medicine the doctor in Ernakulam had prescribed.

He took the medicine mechanically.

Lay down without changing out of his clothes.

Ancy lay beside him in the dark, both of them staring at the ceiling.

"She called," Luckachen said suddenly. "Eleven times today. I saw the missed calls."

"Did you answer?"

"No."

"Will you?"

He was quiet for a long time.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I don't know what I would say to her. I don't know if I can hear her voice without... without breaking completely."

Ancy reached across the space between them, found his hand, held it.

They lay like that until exhaustion finally pulled them under into uneasy sleep.

The next morning, Luckachen woke early as always — old military habits impossible to break.

For a moment, he lay still, hoping maybe yesterday had been a nightmare.

Then he saw Ancy's face — puffy from crying in her sleep, exhausted even in rest — and knew it was real.

He got up quietly, went to the bathroom, splashed water on his face.

Looked at himself in the small mirror.

The man looking back was older than he remembered — grey stubble, dark circles under the eyes, something hollow in the expression that hadn't been there before.

He dressed in his usual white kurta and mundu.

Went outside.

The estate was waking up, workers beginning their shifts, the sounds of the cooperative stirring to life, morning mist still clinging to the valleys.

Everything looked the same.

But nothing was the same.

Rakesh, the Bihar foreman who Luckachen had protected during the investigation, approached hesitantly.

"Sahib, good morning. Should we proceed with the cardamom inspection today as planned?"

Luckachen looked at him, this man who had shown courage when pressured to lie, who had chosen truth despite the personal cost.

"Yes," Luckachen said. "Continue as normal."

"Sahib... we heard..." Rakesh trailed off, not sure how to continue.

"Continue as normal," Luckachen repeated, his voice harder.

Rakesh nodded and backed away.

Luckachen walked the estate paths alone, checking plants he'd checked a thousand times, noting things that needed attention, maintaining the routine because routine was the only thing keeping him functional.

But he saw the way workers looked at him.

Saw the whispers that stopped when he approached.

Saw the pity in their eyes.

By noon, the entire village would know.

Luckachen's daughter had eloped.

Run away with some boy to get court marriage.

Shamed the family.

The gossip would be merciless.

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Inside the house, Ancy had not gotten out of bed.

The maid came at 8 AM as usual, found the previous night's food untouched, and started to prepare fresh kanji.

But when she brought it to the bedroom, Ancy turned her face away.

"Chechi, you must eat something," the maid said gently.

Ancy said nothing.

The maid left the food on the bedside table and backed out quietly.

By afternoon, Ancy still had not eaten.

Had not taken water.

Had not changed out of the same dress she'd worn yesterday.

She lay on the bed, rosary beads in her lap, fingers unmoving, eyes fixed on the window that looked toward the ridge.

Mattaikochu, who had been checking on the house every hour, saw this and felt alarm shoot through him.

He'd seen grief before — seen workers lose children to illness, seen families shattered by accidents — but this was different.

This was grief mixed with shock mixed with something that looked like the will to live draining away.

At 3 PM, when Ancy still wouldn't take even a sip of water, Mattaikochu made a decision.

He called Fr Mathew.

The priest arrived within an hour, still wearing his cassock from afternoon prayers.

He found Ancy exactly as Mattaikochu had described — lying on the bed, unmoving, unreachable.

"Ancy," Fr Mathew said gently, sitting in the chair beside the bed. "You must eat. You must drink. This grief is understandable, but you cannot let it destroy you."

Ancy's eyes moved to him but didn't focus.

"She left," Ancy whispered. "She left without even saying goodbye. I fed her breakfast that morning. Gave her tea. And she just... left."

"I know."

"What did we do wrong, Father? What did we do to make her afraid to tell us the truth?"

Fr Mathew had no easy answers.

Because the truth was complicated — parents who loved deeply but couldn't imagine their daughter choosing outside their vision, a daughter who loved her parents but loved someone else more, a society where duty and desire so rarely aligned.

"Sometimes," he said carefully, "children make choices we cannot understand. That doesn't mean we failed. It means they're becoming their own people."

"Her own person," Ancy repeated bitterly. "Is that what this is? Becoming her own person by destroying her parents?"

"Ancy — "

"Do you know what people will say?" Her voice was rising now, years of controlled emotion beginning to crack. "They'll say we couldn't manage our own daughter. That we raised her with too much freedom. That Luckachen was wrong to treat her like a partner instead of keeping her properly supervised. They'll say she's shameless, that the boy must have — " she couldn't finish the sentence.

Fr Mathew let her talk.

Let the poison out.

When she finally fell silent, he said quietly:

"What people say doesn't matter. What matters is what's true. And the truth is that Sumi made a choice. Perhaps not the choice you wanted, perhaps not the choice that makes sense to you, but her choice. And she'll have to live with the consequences of that choice just as you'll have to live with the pain of it."

"How?" Ancy's voice broke completely now, tears finally coming. "How do I live with this? How do I wake up every morning knowing my daughter is gone? How do I face the neighbours, the relatives, everyone who'll look at me with pity or judgment or satisfaction that our family finally had a scandal?"

"One day at a time," Fr Mathew said. "One hour at a time if that's all you can manage. But you must eat. You must drink. You must live, Ancy. Because you still have a husband who needs you, a household that depends on you, and yes, even a daughter who, whether you can see it now or not, still needs her mother."

At that, Ancy's resistance broke.

She sat up slowly, took the glass of water Fr Mathew offered, drank it in small sips that felt like swallowing stones.

The maid brought fresh kanji with pickle.

Ancy ate three spoons.

It wasn't much.

But it was something.

Fr Mathew stayed for another hour, sitting with her in silence mostly, occasionally reading passages from his prayer book in Malayalam, the familiar words washing over the room like water over wounds.

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Before Fr Mathew left, he found Luckachen in his office, surrounded by cooperative papers he was trying and failing to focus on.

"She's eating," the priest said. "Not much, but something."

Luckachen nodded without looking up.

"And you?" Fr Mathew asked. "How are you managing?"

"I'm fine."

Fr Mathew wanted to speak to Luckachen, which he is not ready to. But a heartfelt conversation is always a big relief for old people in trouble.

"Luckachen, People will talk, I told the same to Ancy also" he said gently. "But what matters is what's true. And the truth is that Sumi made a choice. Perhaps not the choice you wanted, but her choice."

After a small silence, Luckachen replied.

"She didn't just leave," his voice breaking. "She lied to us for years. She made us look like fools."

"And now she's suffering for it," Fr Mathew said. "But so are you. The anger is eating you alive."

"I said I'm fine." His voice was sharp, then he softened it with effort. "I'm sorry, Father. I just... I need time. Need to think."

Fr Mathew studied him — the way he held himself too rigidly, the way his hand kept going to his chest where the cough was clearly worsening, the way he wouldn't meet anyone's eyes.

"The cough is worse," the priest observed.

"It's nothing."

"You should see the doctor again. The one in Ernakulam."

"I will. When I have time."

They both knew he wouldn't.

The words hung between them, heavy as the mist rolling in from the hills.

****

At Poonjar, Sumi was facing her own reckoning.

The welcome from Sunil's family had been kind but strained, his father performing the traditional rites, his mother's hug warm but quick, as if she was afraid of what her son had brought into their home.

The house was smaller than what Sumi was used to, a modest three bedroom in a middle-class neighbourhood, rubber plantation visible from the back window, the sounds of neighbours living too close. The house smelled of rubber and damp concrete, so different from the cardamom and earth of home.

Sunil's brother Stephen was polite but distant, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

Dayana, whom Sumi had known from school, tried to be welcoming, but even she seemed uncertain how to treat this girl who'd been a classmate and was now a sister-in-law acquired through scandal.

Sumi sat on the edge of the bed in the small room she now shared with Sunil.

"You called them again?" Sunil asked, his voice gentle as he sat beside her.

Sumi nodded. "Mattaikochu Chettan answered. Chettan told me about Papa and Amma."

He pulled her close. "I'm sorry."

"Are you regretting it?" Sunil had asked.

Sumi had answered honestly: "I don't know. I don't know if I did the right thing. I just... I couldn't marry someone else."

It wasn't the passionate declaration he'd hoped for.

But it was honest.

"What if he dies thinking I betrayed him?" Sumi whispered. "What if I never get to tell him I didn't mean to hurt him?"

Sunil had no answers. He just held her as she cried.

She again tried Mattaikochu Chettan number.

He answered again.

"Mattaikochu Chetta," Sumi's voice was small, frightened. "Please, can I talk to Amma? Or Papa? They're not answering my calls."

"Mole," he said, voice rough, "they're not ready. Give them time."

"How much time? I just want to explain — "

"There's nothing to explain that will change what you did." The words came out harsher than he intended. "You made your choice. Now live with it."

He hung up before she could respond.

Mattaikochu turned away. His hands driven her to school every morning for many years, where she was shaking with the phone in his hand.

Half to himself, half to the maid who was cleaning up in the kitchen within earshot, he said:

"These days kids have no understanding of real love."

She even tried Fr Mathew, who answered and was kind but firm:

"They're hurting, child. Give them space. Give them time. And pray. Pray that God softens their hearts before the damage becomes permanent."

"How much time?" Sumi had asked, voice breaking.

"I don't know. Healing has its own pace. All you can do is be patient and hope."

But patience felt impossible when every day that passed meant another day her parents were suffering because of her choice.

Sunil tried to comfort her, held her when she cried, reminded her that they'd known this would be hard, that love was worth fighting for.

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The news had spread through Thopramkudy like wildfire. The workers in the fields looked at Luckachen with pity in their eyes. The

women who came to visit Ancy brought food but left quickly, their silence more painful than words.

By the end of the second week, the silence in the house had developed its own gravity. It was most oppressive in the kitchen on Tuesday morning when Ancy stood before a bubbling pot of sambar.

She reached for the small container of curry leaves, her hand hovering over the green sprigs. Usually, this was the moment she felt a flicker of pride, choosing the freshest leaves Sumi had helped her wash just days before. Now, she stared at them with a sudden, visceral revulsion. Her fingers shook as she picked up a single stem.

"Curry leaf," she whispered, the words catching in a throat that had gone dry from days of monosyllables.

She dropped the leaves into the hot oil. The sizzle was sharp, almost accusing. She watched them turn dark and brittle, giving their scent to the steam, and realized that the sambar would taste exactly as it always did, but the hands that usually reached for the first bowl were a few kilometres away in a house that smelled of rubber.

Luckachen entered the kitchen, his white kurta looking too large for his narrowing frame. He didn't ask what was for breakfast; he simply sat at the table and opened a ledger, his pen moving in the same mechanical, rhythmic staccato as Ancy's knife. He dealt with harvest schedules and cooperative accounts with a cold, military precision, but he never once looked at the doorway where Sumi used to appear.

He didn't notice that Ancy had forgotten to add salt to the pot. They ate in a hollow, parallel silence, the flavourless meal a perfect testament to the lives they were now leading – functional, processed, and completely discarded.

But at night, they would sit together in their bedroom, not speaking, just existing side by side in their separate pain.

Sumi's room remained untouched.

The bed made, clothes hanging in the cupboard, textbooks from college still stacked on the desk.

Ancy couldn't bring herself to go in there.

Couldn't face the evidence of the daughter who'd been there just days ago and now was gone.

The missed calls from Sumi continued. Five, six times a day initially, then less frequently when neither parent answered.

“Curry leaf.” The phrase stuck.

Over the next few days, whenever someone mentioned Sumi — and people did mention her, carefully, watching Ancy's reaction — Ancy would just shake her head and say, "We were the curry leaf."

The other women understood immediately.

The spread through the village like wildfire, painful in its accuracy, beautiful in its bitterness.

Parents everywhere recognized themselves in it.

The ones who'd sacrificed everything, given everything, built everything, only to watch their children choose differently and walk away.

Curry leaf.

Used, then discarded.

****

The cough of Luckachan was getting worse, he knew it, even if he wouldn't admit it.

Blood came up more regularly now.

The tightness in his chest was constant.

The diagnosis report hidden in his desk drawer mocked him, three to six months to get surgery before Stage 1 became Stage 2.

Two months had already passed since the scan.

He had maybe four months left to act.

But he couldn't think about that now.

Couldn't think about scheduling surgery when his household was shattered, when his wife was barely eating, when the scandal was still fresh and raw.

One crisis at a time.

That's how he survived.

Deal with the immediate wound, then worry about the ones that would kill you later.

****

The days that followed established a new rhythm.

Sumi called her parents every day, sometimes multiple times a day.

Her father or mother never answered.

Sunil's parents were also worried, not about Sumi herself, but about the scandal.

About Luckachen's reputation in the hills.

About whether there would be consequences they hadn't foreseen.

"What if he comes here?" Sunil's mother asked one evening, voice low so Sumi wouldn't hear from the next room. "What if he brings people? What if there's violence?"

"Luckachen isn't that kind of man," Sunil's father replied.

In their room that night, Sumi lay awake long after Sunil had fallen into exhausted sleep.

She could hear his steady breathing beside her — this person she'd chosen, this person she'd destroyed her family for.

She loved him.

She was sure of that.

But was love enough?

Was love enough to justify the pain she entrusted on her parents?

Was love enough to justify her parents complete silence?

Was love enough to justify becoming the scandal that would define her family for years?

She didn't know.

All she knew was that she'd made her choice and now had to live with it.

The tears came quietly — the kind that didn't make sound, that just leaked from the corners of closed eyes and soaked into the pillows in modest room far from everything familiar.

Tomorrow would be the same.

And the day after.

And the day after that.

Calling parents who wouldn't answer.

Living in a house that wasn't hers.

Being the daughter-in-law who'd arrived through scandal.

Being the curry leaf her own parents had discarded from their hearts.

The metaphor worked both ways, she realised.

They felt thrown away by her.

She felt thrown away by them.

Everyone was curry leaf.

Everyone was used and discarded.

The mist gathered over Thopramkudy.

The stars shone over Poonjar.

And in both places, people who loved each other were learning to live with wounds that might never fully heal.

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THE RECONCILIATION

19
The Anatomy of Sacrifice

October 2007

Two months had passed since the elopement, and Thopramkudy had settled into an uneasy normalcy. The monsoon rains had come and gone, leaving the cardamom plants lush and heavy with promise. Luckachen's health had improved with the new medication, his cough had lessened, his appetite returned, and though the cancer still lurked in the shadows of his chest, the doctor's reports were cautiously optimistic. The house, too, had found a rhythm. Ancy had begun cooking again, the scent of sambar and freshly ground spices filling the kitchen each morning. The workers still averted their eyes when they passed Luckachen in the fields, but the whispers had faded, replaced by the quiet hum of routine.

Yet, beneath this fragile peace, tensions simmered. The local body elections had been announced for the second week of December, and Ward 2, the ward that included Luckachen's estate, the church, the cooperative plots, and Giri's family house, had become a battleground of pride and politics.

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Mattaikochu found Luckachen in the vanilla plots early one morning, the dew still clinging to the leaves. The air smelled of damp earth and the faint, sweet scent of vanilla pods, but Luckachen barely noticed. His fingers moved methodically along the vines, checking for pests, though his mind was elsewhere.

"Ichaaya," Mattaikochu said, his voice low, "there's talk in the town."

Luckachen didn't look up. "About?"

"Giri." Mattaikochu hesitated. "The youth are rallying behind him. They say he's the candidate for Ward 2. They're calling him a hero, saying he stood for love, for freedom, against old ways."

Luckachen's hand stilled on a vine. The morning light caught the silver in his hair, the lines around his eyes deepening. "And what else?"

Mattaikochu exhaled. "They're saying... we locked Sumi in a room. Forced her. That we're the kind of people who think we own our children."

For the first time, Luckachen looked up. His eyes were calm, but there was something dangerous beneath the surface. "Have we done that, Mattaikochu? Have we ever locked her in a room? Have we ever forced her?"

Mattaikochu looked away, his calloused hands twisting the edge of his mundu. "No, Ichaaya. But you know how people talk."

"And Giri lets them," Luckachen said, his voice quiet but edged with steel. "He lets them say these things. He doesn't correct them."

"He's young. He wants to be a hero."

Luckachen straightened, his military posture returning. "A hero doesn't build his name on lies. A hero doesn't let his people believe falsehoods about others."

Mattaikochu didn't reply. Neither of them said what they both were thinking – that Giri had stood against Luckachen twice now, not once. First with the march, then with Sumi's elopement. And now, with the elections.

Luckachen turned back to the vanilla vines, but his hands were no longer steady.

****

Across the valley, Giri was riding a wave of youthful enthusiasm. The college general secretary, the cooperative bank member, and now, if the whispers were true, the panchayat candidate for Ward 2. His

phone buzzed constantly with WhatsApp messages, the youth wing's group chat alive with emojis and Malayalam slogans:

"Giri for Ward 2: The Voice of Youth!" and "Change is Coming!"

His room was littered with half-designed posters, the shake-hand poll symbol, bold against green cardamom leaves, his name printed in confident red.

That evening, he called Priya, her voice a familiar comfort amidst the chaos.

"You sound excited," she said.

"I am," Giri admitted. "It feels like everything is finally coming together. College, the bank, now this. I can do real work here, Priya. For the people."

A pause. Then, softer: "Are you worried?"

"About what?"

"About Luckachen."

Giri's smile faded. The name hung between them, heavy with history. Luckachen's influence in the cooperative, his respect in the village, his quiet power. "He's respected. Very respected. If he opposes me..."

"He can stop you," Priya finished.

Giri exhaled, rubbing his temples. "I know."

The political party Mandalam office in Thopramkudy was already buzzing that evening, the finalization of candidates for the 14 wards underway. The mood was relaxed, tea glasses clinking, laughter over shared jokes, the scent of strong chai mixing with the damp evening air. But beneath the surface, tensions simmered.

Then the door opened.

Luckachen stepped in.

The room fell silent.

Mandalam President Cyriac stood immediately, his face breaking into a smile. "Luckachen Chetta, Welcome! Come, sit. We were just finalizing the list. Almost done."

Luckachen did not sit. He stood near the door, his hands folded, his posture ramrod straight. The room seemed to shrink around him, the younger members shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

"Cyriac," Luckachen said, his voice quiet, the kind of quietness men use when they expect to be obeyed, "you know I never meddle in politics. I've stayed away from party matters all these years."

Cyriac nodded, his smile faltering. "Of course, Chetta. Your focus has always been the cooperative, the workers — "

"But this time," Luckachen continued, "because of the work we've done here, because of what we're trying to build, I have one suggestion. Ward 2. I want Mrs. Leelama from the Tunkaathel family as the candidate."

A ripple of tension ran through the room.

Leelama, 58 years old, a long-time party worker, active in women's self-help groups, deeply involved in the cooperative from its early days. No one could question her credentials. But no one had expected this either.

Cyriac looked around the table, his gaze lingering on the younger members who had been rallying behind Giri. The older members nodded slowly, their respect for Luckachen's judgment evident.

The younger ones shifted in their seats, their faces flushed with frustration.

"If you've already decided," Luckachen said, his voice even, "no issue. Leelama will stand as an independent."

Cyriac raised both hands quickly. "Nothing like that, Luckachen Chetta, If you have this opinion, we will discuss it. Your word carries weight here."

Luckachen gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. He looked around the room, greeting each person with a slight smile, a word of recognition. But his eyes never once fell on Giri. Not even a glance.

He turned, touched Cyriac's shoulder in farewell, and walked out.

The door closed behind him.

The room remained silent for several seconds.

Then the argument began.

The elders spoke first. Calm, measured voices citing Leelama's experience, her clean image, the need to respect Luckachen's suggestion.

The younger members pushed back, louder and more emotional.

"How can one individual decide the party candidate?"

"Giri has worked hard!"

"He united the youth!"

"This isn't democracy!"

The argument grew heated. Voices rose. Someone banged a fist on the table.

Cyriac let it go on for ten minutes, his face impassive.

Then he stood.

The room quieted.

He looked around, at the elders, at the youth, at the empty chair where Luckachen had not sat.

"We are a party of principles," he said slowly. "We are also a party that listens to the people who have stood with us. Leelama will be our candidate for Ward 2."

A few young members protested, their faces flushed with anger.

Cyriac raised his hand. "The decision is made."

He continued reading the list.

"Ward 1. Tomy Chirayattukara. Ward 2. Leelama Tunkaathel. Ward 3 — "

Giri sat frozen.

The names blurred as Cyriac read them, the sound of his own ward being assigned to someone else a physical blow. His hands clenched under the table, his nails biting into his palms. The room spun for a second. Leelama, not him. After all the work, the youth rallies, the whispers of his name as a hero. One word from Luckachen, and it was gone.

Outside the window, the mist was rolling in.

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Giri left the meeting in a daze, the night air cool against his heated face. He walked without direction, his shoes kicking up dust on the familiar paths. The cardamom plants rustled in the breeze, their scent usually comforting now feeling like a mockery.

He ended up at the old stone wall near the church, the same place where he and Sumi had sat so many times, talking about dreams and futures. The same place where he'd waited for her that fateful morning, his heart pounding with fear and hope.

Now, it felt empty.

His phone buzzed. Priya calling. He ignored it. Then another call, his father. He silenced that too.

He sat on the wall, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands.

Luckachen had struck back.

Not with anger. Not with words.

With silence. With a small smile.

****

Back at the estate, Luckachen sat on the veranda, the night air cool and damp. Ancy brought him a glass of warm water with honey, the way she had when he was first diagnosed. He took it without a word, his eyes fixed on the ridge where the mist was gathering.

The night air was heavy, but Luckachen's chest felt lighter for the first time since June. He had issued a direction, and the village had obeyed. Ancys' silhouette framed by the warm yellow light of the hallway. She didn't ask about the meeting; she already knew the outcome from the way he sat — ramrod straight, like a sentry who had just secured a perimeter.

"You did what you had to do," she said quietly.

He didn't reply. "She'll be a good candidate," Ancy continued. "Leelama. The women respect her. The workers trust her."

Luckachen took a slow sip of the water. "It's not about that."

"Then what?"

"It's about the lie," he said. "The lie that we locked her away. That we forced her. That we're monsters."

Ancy sat beside him, her hand finding his. "People will forget. They always do."

"Will they?" Luckachen's voice was quiet. "Or will they remember that Giri stood for love, and we stood for control?"

The mist thickened around them, the hills disappearing into the white silence.

"We didn't do that," Ancy said firmly. "We loved her. We gave her everything."

"And she threw it away," Luckachen said, his voice breaking slightly. "She chose him over us. Over our love. Over everything we built."

Ancy was silent for a long moment. Then she said, "We still have each other. We still have the cooperative. We still have the workers who depend on us."

Luckachen looked at her, really looked at her for the first time in months. The lines around her eyes, the silver in her hair, the quiet strength that had held them both together through storms and scandals.

"We do," he said softly.

"We cannot carry this resentment forever, Ichaaya," she said softly. "Anger is a poison we drink hoping the other person dies. It only hurts the ones who hold on to it."

He looked toward the ridge where the lights of the town twinkled like fallen stars. "It is not about anger, Ancy. It is about the order of things. Parents are the roots of the tree; they are meant to be valued, not discarded like waste once the fruit is picked."

He continued with firm voice "She just discarded as, the same way as you have told... like curry leaves."

Without a pause Luckachen continued "Giri didn't just help her leave; he helped the village believe we were the ones who forced her out. I will not agree to a 'peace' that is built on a lie against our name."

Ancy sighed, the sound lost in the rustle of cardamom leaves. She saw the "Thurutel Iron" was still glowing hot, refusing to bend even for the sake of quiet.

Inside the house, the clock ticked steadily. The scent of sambar still lingered in the air, the curry leaves floating in the congealed gravy like forgotten promises.

****

Giri sat on the old stone wall near the church, the coldness of the granite seeping through his clothes. When his phone buzzed, he finally answered.

"Uncle destroyed me with one word, Priya," Giri whispered, his voice cracking with the emotional trauma of the public rejection. "After the college success, my public works with bank, the way I stood up for this village... Uncle erased it all in ten minutes."

"Giri, listen to me," Priya's voice was steady, coming from a world of logic and sterile lab lights. "There are always two sides to a story. There is yours and mine, ours and theirs. You see yourself as the hero who stood for love and freedom. But in that office, Luckachen Uncle sees the man who stole his daughter while he was fighting for his life. How can both stories be true? Because you are measuring freedom while he is measuring betrayal. You are looking at the sunrise of your career, and he is looking at the sunset of his life."

"I thought I was changing things," Giri said, looking at the dark hills.

"You changed his world, Giri. You can't expect him not to change yours in return. There is a price for being a 'hero' in someone else's tragedy."

Despite her firm tone during the call, a quiet guilt gnawed at Priya the moment she hung up. She had been the architect of her best friend's escape, but she couldn't ignore the wreckage she had left behind.

Priya stared at the complex equations in her notebook, but her mind drifted to the old, silver-fished anatomy atlas hidden at the bottom of her mother's trunk at home.

Her mother had traded medical school for a wedding saree and a life of uncomplaining silence. She remembered the way her mother would stir the fish curry, efficient, precise, but with eyes that always seemed to be looking at a horizon she had been forced to leave behind.

Her mother never grumbled, but she never smiled with her whole face either. That partial smile was a warning Priya carried in her marrow, a reminder that, a woman's brilliance was often treated as a dowry to be spent, rather than a fire to be tended.

Is she helping Sumi be brave? Or helping her be selfish? What if Sumi regrets it? What if she doesn't? What if the right choice destroys good people?

But she helps anyway. Because that's what friendship means, supporting choices, you're not sure about because the person making them needs you.

She wondered if she'd ever be this brave for Giri.

****

Back in his office in the night, Luckachen pulled a heavy envelope from his desk drawer, hidden behind the cooperative ledgers where Sumi once found his medicine. It was a report from the high-specialty oncology centre in Mumbai, a second opinion he had sought through a contact in the army.

The local doctor had been cautiously optimistic, noting the lessened cough and returning appetite. But the specialist's notes were more clinical, more precise. The "coin-sized shadow" remained stable, a dark passenger in his chest. However, the report highlighted a concern regarding the "continuous nature of the secondary cough," suggesting that while the cancer was not currently spreading, the irritation was deep.

Detailed investigation required, the report stated. Bronchoscopy recommended to assess tissue integrity.

He looked at the word 'Bronchoscopy' like a scout looking at an enemy minefield. He knew he had to cross it, but he wasn't ready to surrender his command just yet.

He felt the familiar tickle in his throat and suppressed it with practiced discipline. "As of now, nothing to worry," he murmured to the empty room, repeating the local doctor's words to keep his own fear at bay.

But as he tucked the Mumbai report back into the shadows of the desk, he knew the truce with his body was as fragile as the peace in Ward 2.

Outside, the mist rolled in, swallowing the hills whole.

Somewhere in the silence, the wind carried the faint sound of youthful voices from the village below, chanting a name that wasn't his.

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20
The Weight of Unanswered Call

December 2007

The kitchen light burned late again, casting long shadows on the walls where family photos hung, Sunil's graduation, Dayana's school prizes, a faded picture of Ponnachan and Mary on their wedding day, their faces younger than their children remembered.

Ponnachan sat at the small dining table, the same table where he had once taught Sunil to count coins with calloused fingers, where he had celebrated his son's bank PO result with tears of pride, where he had dreamed of a quiet old age surrounded by grandchildren's laughter. Now, the table held only two glasses of black tea, the surface dull with a film of cold. The air smelled of old rice and the kind of silence that settles in a house when the heart of it is missing.

Mary stood near the stove, her back to him, stirring nothing. The flame was low, the vessel empty. She had not cooked properly since Sumi and Sunil arrived. Her hands, once swift and sure with a knife, now moved like someone underwater, slow and heavy with everything she couldn't say.

Ponnachan spoke first, his voice rough – not the kind of grief that cries, the kind that just sits in the throahet refusing to become a. voice. "If our Dayana had done this... if she had eloped without a word, without even a glance back, without even making us know... what would our state be?"

Mary did not turn. Her shoulders moved — a small, helpless shrug, the kind of shrug that's carrying more than it looks like. "We would have died inside," she said quietly. "Every day. Every night. Wondering if she was safe. Wondering if we had failed her. Wondering if we had pushed her away without knowing."

“We didn't even go to Varkey’s daughter's wedding last Sunday," Ponnachan said, his voice barely a shadow in the dim kitchen. "What would we have said when they asked about the new girl in our house? How do we explain a daughter gained through a back door while her own father bleeds silence in the hills?"

Mary leaned against the counter; her eyes fixed on the dark window. The fear of the village's whispers had become a wall, turning their own home into a fortress they were too ashamed to leave.

“We have done something grave,” he continued, his fingers tracing the rim of the tumbler, the metal cold against his skin. “For twenty-three years, they gave her everything — love, safety, comfort, education, freedom to dream. And she left. With our son. Without a word. Without even the courtesy of a goodbye.”

Mary finally turned. Her eyes were red, but dry the tears had already been spent in the dark, when no one could see. “She is a very nice girl,” she said, her voice steady but her hands trembling just slightly as she reached for the empty vessel. “I accepted her and loved her as my own daughter... But she must be under great mental stress too. Imagine it, leaving the only home she ever knew, the only parents she ever had, for a boy she loves. She must be carrying guilt the size of these hills.”

Ponnachan nodded slowly, the weight of her words pressing down on him like the mist outside. “I keep thinking...” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, “if only I had spoken to Luckachen. If only I had called him the moment they arrived at our gate. If only I had said, ‘Let us talk. Let us do this properly.’ If only our son had told us he was going to do such a thing.”

Mary’s voice cracked — just once, like a twig snapping underfoot. “But we didn’t,” she said. “We were afraid. Afraid of what he would say. Afraid of the village. Afraid of losing face. Love for our son made us blind.”

Ponnachan looked at his wife, really looked and saw the same grief he carried, etched into the lines around her eyes, the way her fingers clenched and unclenched around the edge of the counter. “We have to do something,” he said, the words heavy but sure. “For their reconciliation. For our son. For their daughter. For all of us.”

Mary nodded, her voice barely a breath. “Whatever it takes,” she said. “Even if it means going there ourselves. Even if it means bowing our heads.”

They sat in silence, a silence that wasn’t empty. It just didn’t have room left in it for anything either of them knew how to say.

The tea grew colder. The night deepened. And somewhere in the darkness, two parents began to plan a journey they should have made months ago.

****

The ledger lay open on Ittichen’s desk, the numbers blurring as if the ink itself were dissolving. His wife’s room remained dark, the door closed since their elder son’s funeral — a silence that had spread like rot through the house, through the accounts, through the very land he had built his empire upon.

The court’s delay in the quarry case was another crack in Ittichen’s foundation. Biju, the foreman, had refused the latest bribe, his confidence growing with each passing day. Ittichen’s lawyer sensed something amiss. Biju’s defiance wasn’t just stubbornness; it was calculated. But the reason eluded them. Their suspicions, as always, fell on Luckachen. He had a way of moving pieces without being seen, of turning the board when no one was looking.

And he had.

With the patience of a sniper, the precision of a strategist, and the calm of a man who knew the land better than his opponents, Luckachen had made his move. Father Joseph, his voice in places where his own could not reach, had met Biju in the dim light at the

jail. They spoke of justice for Raju, of the cooperative promise, a partnership for Biju if he stood firm. It was a gamble, but Luckachen had calculated the odds: a man like Biju, caught between fear and survival, would choose the side that offered him dignity and a future.

The cooperative wasn't just bait for Biju. It was the first stone in a new foundation. One built on fairness, not fear. And Luckachen had spent decades learning how to lay stones.

Even MLA K.T. Thomas, usually a storm of bluster and threats, was uncharacteristically quiet. His political rival, the Home Minister, was gaining ground within the party, his influence spreading like cracks in a dam. The incumbent Chief Minister had already signalled he wouldn't contest the next election, and the Home Minister was positioning himself as the heir apparent. With the police and intelligence machinery under his control, he didn't need to strike openly. A party inquiry into K.T. Thomas's conduct was enough — a subtle knife, not a hammer. The message was clear. Fall in line, or be cut loose.

K.T. Thomas knew the game. He wouldn't risk a legal battle — not when the party's image was at stake. But he wouldn't let Luckachen's manoeuvring go unanswered. The quarry case would drag on, but the real battle had shifted. It was no longer about land or lawsuits. It was about who could outlast the silence.

Outside, the wind carried the scent of crushed cardamom and damp earth, but inside, the air smelled only of camphor and old grief. The quarry contracts, the political connections, the land deeds — none of it mattered when the woman who had once been his quiet strength now lived as a shadow behind a closed door.

He stared at the ridge lights — distant, indifferent — where Luckachen's estate lay hidden in the mist. For the first time, Ittichen understood, what he'd actually lost, not only a son, but the idea that power could outlast grief. The empire he had built with ruthless hands was crumbling, not from the outside pressure, but from the silence within.

Luckachen watched the mist roll over the ridges, knowing Ittichen was somewhere beyond it, fuming, plotting. Let him. The land had taught him patience. The Army had taught him strategy.

The Home Minister's moves were precise, his patience infinite. He wasn't just targeting K.T. Thomas; he was reshaping the party in his own image, one where loyalty was measured in silence, not slogans.

The wind rustled through the cardamom trees, but Ittichen heard only the echo of his own breath, shallow and uneven. The house had become a tomb, and he was its last occupant, waiting for a reckoning that would not come.

****

Ancy had become a ghost in her own home.

She moved through the rooms like a shadow, her feet bare on the cold floor, her sari pleats whispering against her legs. The house smelled of damp wood and old spices, the kind that lingers when no one is there to breathe it in. She swept the veranda every morning, washed the vessels every evening, boiled rice that no one ate. Her hands moved mechanically, as if they belonged to someone else.

The cough had worsened. Luckachen tried to hide it — stepped outside when the fits came, coughed into his handkerchief, swallowed the taste of blood. But Ancy saw. She always saw.

One evening, as the mist rolled in like a shroud, they sat together on the veranda, the same veranda where they had once watched Sumi play as a child, where they had argued over school fees and harvest yields, where they had sat in comfortable silence for years, needing no words. Now, the silence was different. Heavier. Filled with the things they could not bring themselves to say.

Ancy spoke first, her voice barely above the hum of the crickets. "Will she come back?"

Luckachen looked toward the ridge, where the lights of Ittichen's farmhouse flickered like distant stars. "I don't know."

Ancy's fingers tightened around her rosary, the beads digging into her palm. "If she comes back... will we accept her?"

Luckachen was silent for so long that the mist seemed to thicken around them, settling in the way grief does when no one will name it. Then he said, his voice rough, "I don't know. On one side she is our daughter, our only daughter and on the other side, she made us feel like curry leaf."

"I don't know" He whispered again.

Another silence. The kind that stretches until it becomes its own kind of answer.

Ancy's voice trembled, just once. "Have you spoken to her on the phone?"

Luckachen shook his head. "No," he admitted. "She calls. I don't answer."

Ancy stilled her fingers on the rosary beads, her gaze locked onto the tremble in Luckachen's hands — the hands that had once steadied a rifle, now shaking at nothing more than his own daughter's silence. "How can I?" she said. "What she did was not even in our wildest dreams, and the pain she put you through... I wanted to answer, but I stopped myself."

"Mattaikochu has spoken to her a few times," Luckachen said softly. "He updates me about them whenever he's talked to her."

"Next time she calls," Luckachen said, "you should talk to her. It will bring some calm to your grief. It's what you need."

Luckachen continued looking away, his jaw clenched. "But don't hand me the phone," he said, his voice rough. "I don't trust myself not to break."

Luckachen turned his gaze back to the mist, his jaw set in that familiar, stubborn line. But as the light from the veranda caught him, Ancy noticed how his white kurta — once crisp, starched, and authoritative — now hung loose and hollow on his shoulders. The fabric seemed too

large for a man who was being eaten from the inside by both the shadow in his lungs and the betrayal of his only child. The "Thurutel Iron" was still there, but the frame it supported was slowly weathering away.

Ancy nodded — small, tired. A mother who had faced everything alone, even when Luckachen was away serving the nation.

They sat in silence after that, the kind of silence, neither of them knew to say, how to close the distance between them and their daughter.

The mist thickened, swallowing the veranda light. The hills watched, silent as they always had — judges, witnesses, keepers of traditions that had no room for a daughter's defiance or a father's grief.

And somewhere in that darkness, two parents waited, not for forgiveness, but for the sound of a phone ringing in the dark, and the courage to answer, to choose her over whatever the society would say about it.

But traditions and society versus the betrayal of their own daughter. They were caught in the middle, torn between the daughter they wanted back and the fear of being seen as pawns in a game they never chose to play – like curry leaves in the sambar, small and unnoticed, but the thing that flavours the dish and bears the heat.

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Giri's phone buzzed every evening at 9 PM sharp.

Priya.

Her voice was the only steady thing in his life these days, the one constant in the storm of guilt and uncertainty that had become his world since the elopement. She was home now, preparing for UGC-NET, her voice carrying the familiar cadence of textbooks and chai stalls, of a life that had not been upended by love and its consequences.

They talked for hours, sometimes until the battery died, sometimes until the first light of dawn crept through Giri's window. She told him about her studies, about the professors who challenged her, about the

quiet satisfaction of solving a problem that had kept her awake for three nights. He told her about the bank, about the small victories with loan approvals, about the farmers who thanked him with folded hands and eyes that held more gratitude than words ever could.

But mostly, they talked about the ache.

The ache of knowing they had helped two people find love, and in doing so, had broken two families. The ache of knowing Luckachen's silence was louder than any shout, heavier than any strike Giri had ever led. The ache of knowing that love — even when it is right — can still leave wreckage in its wake.

One night, Priya's voice was softer than usual, soft in a way a voice goes when it's been carrying something too long. "I'm scared, Giri."

He didn't answer at first. Outside his window, the wind rustled through the rubber trees, the same wind that had once carried the sound of slogans and laughter. Now, it carried only silence. "Of what?" he asked finally.

"Of losing you," she said. "Of becoming the thing, we fought against. People who let fear decide for them."

Giri closed his eyes, Luckachen's silence pressing on him the same way the mist was pressing on the window glass. "I already have," he admitted, the words tasting like ash.

"I spent so much time fighting for a seat in the ward, Piya," Giri said, the phone pressed hard against his ear as if it were his only link to the world. "But all my political dreams feel small now, utterly insignificant, compared to the silence of the Thurutel house. I wanted to be a hero for love, but I didn't realize that every hero leaves behind a trail of wreckage they never intended to create."

Priya's voice was gentle, the way it always was when she knew he was carrying something too heavy to name. "You did what was right."

"Did I?" he asked, the question raw in the dark.

She didn't answer with words. Instead, she stayed on the line, her breath steady, her presence a quiet anchor in the storm. And for the first time in weeks, Giri felt something shift inside him, not the weight lifting, but the realization that he did not have to carry it alone.

They talked until the battery died, until the screen went dark and the room was filled with the kind of silence that is not empty but full – full of the things they could not say, full of the love that does not need words to be real.

And in that silence, they found something stronger than fear.

They found each other.

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21
The Broken Ground

February 2008

The Sunday sun rising over Thopramkudy didn't bring the usual warmth; it felt like a harsh, interrogating light. For six months, Ancy had lived as a ghost within the starched white walls of the Thurutel house, moving in a world of monosyllables and mechanical chores. The vibrant Christmas and new year celebrations of her memory had faded into the grey reality of a home that felt like a waiting room for a tragedy that had already arrived.

That morning, Luckachen stood by the bedroom window, his white kurta hanging loose on a frame that seemed to be retreating into itself. He was fastening his watch, his fingers fumbling with the strap, a tremor he couldn't quite mask.

"It is time for you, Ancy," he said, his voice a low vibration that triggered a familiar, suppressed tickle in his throat. "You cannot hide from the village forever. Fr Mathew is right. Normalcy is a discipline you must practice. If you stay inside, you are admitting you have something to hide."

Ancy didn't look up from the rosary beads she was thumbing. The wood of the beads was polished smooth by her anxiety. "Normalcy is for people whose daughters are in their own beds, Ichaaya. Not for people like us. To go there is to invite them to stare."

"We are Thurutel's," he replied, the Thurutel Iron flashing in his eyes for a fleeting second, though his breath was shallow. "We walk with our heads high because we have done nothing to be ashamed of. We gave her a partner's seat; she chose the back door. That is her ledger, not ours. Dress. We are going for the ten o'clock Mass."

The walk to St. George Church felt like a funeral procession where the deceased was their own dignity. As they entered the churchyard, the

usual Sunday chatter didn't stop, it changed frequency. Ancy felt the "radar" of the village gaze locking onto her. She saw Milk Booth Joby standing near the gate, whispering to a cluster of women. Their eyes flicked toward her and then rapidly toward the ground, a collective choreographed movement of pity that felt heavier than any insult.

Inside, the scent of incense and melted wax felt suffocating. They took their usual pew, third from the front. Before the start of Holy Mass, Ancy felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Leelama Tunkaathel, the woman Luckachen had hand-picked to replace Giri in the elections.

“We are praying for you, Ancy,” Leelama whispered, her voice dripping with a kindness that felt like salt on a fresh wound. “Every night at our prayer group, we mention your name. God gives the heaviest crosses to his strongest children.”

Ancy stilled her fingers on her rosary. She realised then that she was no longer Ancy, the partner of the estate owner; she was a specimen of tragedy. To the parish, she was the Curry Leaf, the one whose flavour had been extracted by a selfish daughter and whose presence was now just a reminder of a meal that had turned bitter. She felt the eyes of the mothers in the back pews boring into her spine, wondering what she had done wrong in those times of Sumi’s "deception."

She stood up abruptly before the Gospel reading.

“ Ichaaya, I can’t breathe,” she hissed.

She retreated down the centre aisle, her footsteps echoing in the sudden silence of the nave. She didn’t stop until she reached the veranda of her house, where the mist was waiting to swallow her whole again. She realised then that the church was no longer a sanctuary, it was just another stage where her shame was the main act.

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Three hundred kilometres away, in a small apartment on the outskirts of Coimbatore, Sumi was discovering that freedom had a very specific, metallic smell, city dust, stale oil, and bus exhaust. The "plain" world

Sunil had sacrificed his promotion for was a landscape of concrete and unyielding heat.

Sunil had returned from the branch by 8:30 PM, his eyes bloodshot from twelve hours of navigating the Tamil-dominated office culture and the quiet sabotage of the newly introduced computer systems. He dropped his bag on the plastic dining table, the sound flat and weary.

"The reconciliation was off by two thousand rupees again," he muttered, rubbing his temples. "The manager left at five, as usual. I stayed back to find it. It was a data entry error from the morning shift, a pensioner's deposit recorded twice."

Sumi placed a plate of simple rice and dal before him. The steam smelled of nothing like the cardamom-infused air of her home. "You should have taken the Madurai promotion, Sunil. You'd be a Deputy Manager there. We wouldn't be worrying about the electricity bill or this matchbox apartment."

Sunil looked at her, his exhaustion turning into a quiet, stubborn defence. "Madurai is further away, I Sumi. Here, we are still within a day's journey if your father... if he calls. I turned it down so we wouldn't be completely lost to them. I thought that's what you wanted."

"He won't call," Sumi said, her voice brittle. She looked at her mobile on the counter. Eleven missed calls to the Thopramkudy landline yesterday. Zero answers. Each silent ring was a hammer blow to her resolve. "I am a ghost to him. I chose you, and in his military ledger, that makes me a bad debt. A traitor to the post."

"You're not a debt," Sunil said, reaching for her hand. His palms were no longer the soft hands of a physics student who daydreamed in the lab; they were becoming calloused by the dry friction of bank ledgers and the stress of city survival. "We are building something. It's just slower than we thought."

"We are orphans of our own choices, Sunil," she whispered, looking out the narrow window at a city that didn't know the name Thurutel.

“In Thopramkudy, the hills watch you, but they belong to you. Here, the walls just lean in, and we belong to no one.”

****

The collapse happened on a Wednesday afternoon, a day when the air in Thopramkudy was so still it felt like a held breath.

Luckachen was in his office, the heavy teak door shut against the world. He was reading a follow-up report from a Mumbai specialist, his eyes fixed on the word Bronchoscopy.

The tickle in his throat, which he had treated as a minor annoyance for months, suddenly turned into a tidal wave of unbearable heat. He tried to reach for the water tumbler, but his knees buckled. The ‘Thurutel Iron’, the spine that had held him straight through wars and quarry disputes, finally gave out, not from anger this time, but from his own body turning on him.

Ancy, who was in the kitchen sorting peppercorns, heard the thud, a heavy, hollow sound that didn't belong in a quiet house. She burst into the room to find Luckachen on the floor, his white kurta stained with a terrifying, vibrant red.

“Mattaikochu! Mattaikochu!” she screamed, her voice cracking the six-month silence of the house.

While Mattaikochu rushed to start the Scorpio, Ancy’s eyes fell on the papers Luckachen had been clutching. She picked up a medical folder and a small, half-empty blister pack of medicine, the same one Sumi had confronted Ichaayan with months ago near the cardamom store.

She saw the date on the Aster Medical Centre report, March 2007.

The realisation hit her harder than the sight of the blood. Sumi had known. That day on the veranda when Sumi said she was "happy" for her mother's sake — she had already seen the shadow in her father's lungs. She had known he was fighting for his life, and she had still chosen to leave him in the middle of his hardest battle.

“She knew,” Ancy whispered into the silent office, her voice turning from grief to a cold, crystalline anger. “She watched him die bit by bit, and she still chose that boy. She didn't just leave us; she left a dying man to face the dark alone.”

As the Scorpio roared to life to take Luckachen toward the specialty hospital in Ernakulam, Ancy sat in the back seat, holding her husband's head in her lap.

She didn't cry.

The Curry Leaf had finally turned into a blade.

****

With Luckachen hospitalised in Ernakulam and sedated after an emergency procedure, a strange, predatory silence descended upon the Thurutel estate. Ittichen Varkey, sitting in his glass farmhouse, sensed the leak in the oak’s bark. To a man like Ittichen, a crisis wasn't a tragedy; it was an opening.

“The lion is in a cage in the city,” Ittichen told his foreman, Varghese, as they stood by the window looking at the lower stone face. “And the cub has run to the plains. The land is screaming for an owner who isn't distracted by ghosts and hospital bills.”

On Thursday morning, the peace of the ridge was shattered. Three heavy trucks and a JCB, their yellow paint caked with the red dust of the valley, rattled up the boundary road near the cooperative plots. They didn't go to Ittichen’s licensed quarry; they stopped at the very edge of the Thurutel ridge.

Mattaikochu stood alone at the gate, his hand trembling as he held his old wooden staff. He saw the men jumping down. Ittichen’s "enforcers," the same men who had delivered the bottle to Raju that fateful night.

“This is a disputed boundary!” Varghese shouted over the roar of the idling engines. “We are clearing the buffer zone for safety as per the new panchayat guidelines. This stone face is a hazard to the road below.”

“Disputed?” Mattaikochu’s voice cracked, but he didn't move. “This land has been Thurutel land since the first migration from Meenachil. Ichaayan is in the hospital fighting for his breath. Have you no shame, Varghese?”

“Your Ichaayan isn't here, and the daughter is gone,” Varghese sneered, gesturing for the backhoe to move forward. “Who are you going to call, Mattaikoche? The police? The Sub-Inspector is currently having tea with the MLA. They are discussing development.”

Mattaikochu retreated toward the vehicle shed, his mind racing. He was a man of the soil, not of the law. He couldn’t reach Luckachen. He knew the workers were still terrified of the "accident" rumours. Then, his eyes fell on a campaign poster lying on road side, a remnant of the tension from weeks ago. Giri for Ward 2.

He dialled the number with shaking fingers.

“Giri,” Mattaikochu sobbed into the phone. “They are taking the stone face. They have trucks and a bulldozer. I am alone, Giri. There is no one to stand with the land.”

Twenty minutes later, the silence of the ridge was shattered by the high-pitched roar of motorcycles. Giri arrived, not as a politician in a starched white shirt, but with twenty members of the youth wing boys who had marched for Raju, boys who had cheered for Sumi at the fashion parade.

Giri stepped off his bike and walked directly into the path of the JCB, his arms crossed.

“Stop the engine,” Giri commanded. His voice carried the same clarity he had found in the college quadrangle, but it was weighted now with a new, quiet authority.

“Get out of the way, Giri,” Varghese warned, leaning out of his Jeep. “This is business. Not a student strike. Your ward election seat is denied by their Ichaayan.”

“I don't need a panchayat seat to know a thief when I see one,” Giri replied, his voice echoing clearly off the stone face. “And I don’t need a megaphone to tell you that this machine isn't moving another inch.”

Varghese sneered, gesturing to the heavy bucket of the loader. “You think your 'youth wing' can stop ten tons of iron? Move, or we’ll clear you along with the brush.”

Giri didn't flinch. He stepped closer, until he was within a few feet of the yellow metal. “Then do it, Varghese. But listen to me first. In these hills, we have a saying: you don’t cut the banana when the house is on fire. It is an act of a coward to strike a man’s land while he is bedridden in a hospital.”

A murmur of agreement rose from the boys behind him. Some of them began taking out their phones, not to make calls, but to record.

“Luckachen is in Ernakulam fighting for his breath,” Giri continued, his voice dropping to a dangerous, steady register. “If you have a dispute with the Thurutel boundary, you wait until the owner is back on his veranda to face you. To come here now, while the house is in grief, is not business. It’s a disgrace to the name of Thopramkudy. Do you really want Ittichen’s legacy to be that he was only brave enough to steal from a sick man?”

The threat was a "subtle knife." Varghese looked at the determined faces of the local youth. These weren't migrant workers who could be intimidated or driven away at night; these were the sons of the soil, the voters of Ward 2, and they were all holding phone cameras.

“We have the MLA with us and the same is required for the development of the region,” Varghese muttered, but the iron was gone from his voice.

“Then tell the MLA to come here and drive the machine himself,” Giri challenged. “Because if you start that engine, you aren't just crossing a boundary. You’re crossing every youth of Thopramkudy. We will sit here tonight, tomorrow, and every day until Ichaayan comes home.

Let's see how much 'development' you can do with us here as a roadblock."

The silence that followed was broken only by the rhythmic puffing of the truck's exhaust. Varghese looked toward the ridge where Ittichen's farmhouse sat, then back at the wall of determined faces. He knew when a "noisy" situation had turned into a permanent problem.

He signalled the driver with a sharp wave. "Take it back. We'll verify the coordinates at the Panchayat office first."

The trucks groaned as they shifted into reverse, their tires spitting gravel as they disappeared into the mist of the lower valley.

Giri stood on the ridge, his chest heaving. Mattaikochu approached him, looking at the young man as if seeing him for the first time, not as a "noisy boy," but as a protector.

"You saved the land, Giri," Mattaikochu said quietly. "Ichaayan... he would have been proud, even if he didn't say it."

Giri looked at the red mud on his shoes. "I didn't do it for him. I did it because I helped break this family, Mattaikochu Chetta. I helped Sumi leave. I owe the land its peace because I took away its future."

Mattaikochu's expression shifted, the old bitterness returning. "Why did you do it, Giri? Why did you tell the boys we locked her in a room? That we used a key on her? Luckachen never did that. He gave her his own seat at the cooperative table. He trusted her more than himself."

Giri froze. He turned to look at the older man, his eyes wide with genuine shock.

"Locked in a room? I never said that. I told the youth wing they were two people in love, nothing more. I was defending her choice, not attacking her father's character. I thought it was a brave elopement, not an escape from a prison."

"Then who told the milk booth? Who told the parish council?" Mattaikochu asked, his voice hollow.

The realization landed like a door slammed shut on his face. Giri looked toward the ridge where Ittichen's farmhouse sat, glowing in the afternoon light. Ittichen didn't just want the stone; he wanted to destroy the Thurutel Iron by making the family look like monsters. He had used Giri's "noisy" idealism as a cover to plant the rumours, making the elopement look like a rescue rather than a betrayal.

"I was a tool again," Giri whispered, the shame of his earlier mistakes returning with a vengeance. "In standing up for love, I helped Ittichen kill the Thurutel name."

He looked out at the cardamom plants, lush and heavy with promise. He knew now that his redemption wouldn't come from a seat in the Panchayat.

It would only come when he found a way to bridge the distance between the Coimbatore apartment and the Ernakulam hospital bed, before the hills decided they had seen enough of the Thurutels.

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22
The Pew that Waited

March 2008

The emergency wing of the specialty hospital in Ernakulam smelled of ozone and terminal anxiety. Sumi, Sunil, and his parents arrived three hours after the urgent call from Giri. The fluorescent lights overhead flickered with a clinical indifference that made Sumi's skin crawl.

They found Ancy sitting on a plastic chair outside the ICU, her hands folded in her lap like two dead birds. She didn't look up when they approached. Her eyes were fixed on the swinging double doors where Luckachen had been taken after his second haemorrhage.

"Amma," Sumi whispered, her voice cracking the silence.

Ancy didn't blink. There was no rush of relief, no maternal embrace. Her expression was a frozen mask of granite.

"Amma, I'm so sorry," Sumi sobbed, reaching out to touch her mother's shoulder.

Ancy shifted, not to receive the touch, but to avoid it. She looked at Sumi then, a look so cold it felt like mountain ice.

"Sorry?" Ancy's voice was a jagged whisper. "It is because of you that Ichaayan is in this state. Because of your selfish, hidden love."

Her gaze flicked to Sunil, who was standing a respectful distance away.

"And you. Why are you standing in front of my Ichaayan's room? What right do you have to be here?"

"Aunty, we just wanted to —" Sunil started.

"You were aware," Ancy interrupted, her voice rising with a terrifying, quiet intensity.

She pulled the Aster Medical report from her bag, the edges crumpled. “You knew about his health. You saw the shadow in his lungs. You saw the blood on his handkerchief months ago, and you didn't even tell me. For your selfishness, you left your father at home to die alone while you ran to the plains.”

Ancy stood up, her frame trembling. “At least you should have told me about his illness. What concerned your heart, you kept it secret – fine. But what was killing my Ichaayan... how could you keep that from me?”

The corridor went silent. Sunil’s parents lowered their heads, the wrong they’d quietly supported sitting on them in that corridor.

Ancy turned her frozen gaze toward Ponnachan and Mary, who stood anchored in place by their own guilt.

“And you both,” she said, her voice shaking, over six months that nobody has asked them how they survived.

“You both happily received my daughter without realizing the pain and anguish inherited from her parents, treating us like just curry leaf. You will only understand this pain when your own daughter does something like this to you.”

Ancy’s voice trailed off, turning inward, as if the words were drifting toward the high hospital ceiling. “If she does... I pray to God no daughter should ever do such things.” The last sentence was whispered half to herself and half to a God she was no longer sure was listening.

Fr Mathew, who had arrived on the evening bus, stepped out from the nearby chapel. He saw the impending explosion and stepped between them, his hand firm on Ancy’s arm.

“Ancy, come. The doctor is calling us inside for a briefing,” he said gently, steering her toward the ICU entrance.

As he reached the door, he paused and turned back toward Sumi. His eyes were no longer those of the kindly priest she had known all her life; they were the eyes of a judge.

“Are you really aware, Sumi? Did you truly know Luckachen’s state was this serious and still choose to keep it yourself?”

He didn't wait for her reply. He pulled Ancy into the sterile light of the inner ward, leaving Sumi standing against the wall, her hands over her mouth, gasping for air that felt as thin as her father's.

A nurse appeared at the ICU glass door. “No visitors permitted inside. He is sedated after the emergency procedure. You may look through the glass, one by one.”

Sumi pressed her forehead against the cold glass. Inside, Luckachen looked small dwarfed by the tubes, the oxygen mask, and the rhythmic, mocking beep of the heart monitor. The Thurutel Iron was buried under a hospital blanket.

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Three days later, in Thopramkudy, the mist was so thick Giri could barely see the milk booth from the road junction. He was standing there, waiting for his friends, when a black Mahindra Scorpio, Ittichen’s vehicle, braked sharply, spraying red mud on Giri’s trousers.

Ittichen got out. It was a rare sight; the man usually conducted business from the leather throne of his backseat. He planted his feet in the dirt with a heavy, deliberate thud.

“I only place my foot on the ground in this village in two places,” Ittichen began, his voice a low, predatory growl. “Either at the church compound or on my own land. Nowhere else. But you... you made me change that today.”

Giri stood his ground, though his heart hammered against his ribs. “The ridge isn't your land, Ittichen Chetta.”

“Who are you to stop me from doing what I want?” Ittichen stepped closer. “What I am doing now is an oath I took when I was your age. A debt to my mother’s curved spine.”

Ittichen gestured toward the rear seat of the vehicle, where Giri saw the MLA, K.T. Thomas, peeping through the tinted glass like a nervous shadow.

“You helped Luckachen’s daughter elope,” Ittichen sneered. “And now you are supporting him? Thinking he won't destroy your political career after what you did? Be with me, Giri. I can ensure much more.”

“I’m not doing this for my political benefits,” Giri said, his voice gaining strength.

“Or maybe,” Ittichen’s smile was a thin, cruel line, “since the only daughter is gone and the father is breathing through a machine, you are planning to take over the property yourself by showing fake love to a dying man? A clever move for a ‘hero’.”

Giri’s fist clenched. “Don't judge everyone by your own rot.”

“Don’t judge me at all,” Ittichen snapped. “I am only doing what the forefathers of the present elite did to make money when they arrived here. Every ‘Thurutel’ and ‘Tunkaathel’ in these hills is enjoying the harsh realities and misdeeds of their grandfathers. I am simply the next chapter of that history. I am destined to do this.”

Ittichen climbed back into the Scorpio, the engine roaring. Before the door closed, he leaned out.

“This is the first and last time you interfere in my work, boy. The hills have a way of burying noisy things.”

The vehicle pulled away into the white void. Giri stood alone at the milk booth, realizing that the "High Range" war wasn't just about land anymore. It was about whether the Thurutel Iron could survive the darkness of its own history.

****

In Thopramkudy, Sunil’s father made a decision after that unexpected encounter with Sumi’s mother.

He told no one, not his wife, not Sunil, not even Dayana. One morning, he took the early bus to Thodupuzha, then another to Thopramkudy. He walked straight to the church, his shoes kicking up dust on the familiar path.

Fr Mathew was in the parish house garden, watering the jasmine bushes that lined the path to the pallimeda. He looked up when he saw the older man approaching, recognition dawning in his eyes.

"Sunil's father?" he asked.

The man nodded. "Ponnachan," he introduced himself. "I need to speak with you, Father."

Fr Mathew set down the watering can and gestured toward the veranda. They sat in the late morning sun, the scent of wet earth and jasmine wrapping around them.

Ponnachan spoke without preamble. "My son has done a great wrong. He took Sumi without the knowledge of her parents, without their blessing. I was forced to support him. I thought it was love, I thought it was inevitable. I was wrong. I am sorry." His voice was rough, the words heavy. "If I had known beforehand, I would never have allowed it. I have a daughter too. I know the pain when a child does something like this. I understand the shame, the helplessness, the nights without sleep."

Fr Mathew listened in silence, his hands folded in his lap.

Ponnachan continued. "We need to do whatever it takes for reconciliation. I am ready for anything. I will speak to the children. I will bring them here. I will apologise on my knees if I have to."

Fr Mathew looked at the older man and saw the grief of a father who had lost more than he could say. "I will speak to Luckachen and Ancy, but need some time once he is back from hospital and everything is fine," he said finally. "I will inform you once I meet them."

Ponnachan nodded. "Thank you, Father."

He stood, but before leaving, he added quietly, "I never thought a casual challenge between two young people would bring all of us to this."

Fr Mathew watched him walk away, decided what he had to do next.

****

Luckachen was finally discharged from the specialty hospital in Ernakulam, his breathing no longer a desperate rasp but aided by a regimented schedule of inhalers and the heavy, forced quietude of a man whose body had staged a coup. The surgery had been successful, but the surgeon's warning lingered: the physical shadow was gone, but the structural integrity of his lungs remained fragile.

Mattaikochu arrived at the Thopramkudy junction early that Friday morning, the Scorpio's engine idling as he waited for the mist to lift enough to safely navigate the descent to Ernakulam to bring the master home. Giri was already there, standing near the milk booth with his hands deep in his pockets, looking like a man who hadn't slept since the trucks had retreated from the ridge.

Mattaikochu rolled down the window. "He's coming home today, Giri. The doctors gave the clearance."

Giri stepped toward the vehicle, his expression uncharacteristically hushed. "That's good news, Mattaikochu Chetta. But listen to me, don't mention a word to him about what happened at the ridge."

Mattaikochu frowned, his hand stalling on the gear shift. "What are you talking about? You stood in front of a JCB while he was under the knife. You saved the lower stone face. Ichaayan should know who stood for the Thurutel name when the enforcers came."

"No," Giri urged, his eyes scanning the thinning morning mist. "Not the trucks, not the youth wing stand, and certainly nothing about my involvement. And most importantly, don't tell him now, he has nothing to do with those foul rumours about Sumi being locked in a room."

Mattaikochu pulled the handbrake, staring at the young man with genuine surprise. “Why hide it? You earned his respect, even if he hasn't given it yet.”

Giri shook his head, a weary wisdom replacing his old college bravado. “Let him take his rest. You know the Thurutel Iron better than I do. If we try to feed him this news now, while he is still leaning on an oxygen tank, he’ll take it as an insult to his strength. He’ll see it as a debt he didn’t ask for, or worse, pity from the boy who helped his daughter leave. Once he is back to full health, he will find the truth himself. The hills have a way of whispering the right things at the right time.”

Mattaikochu watched him for a long moment, then nodded slowly. “You’ve grown up, Giri. I’ll keep my mouth shut. For now.”

****

While Luckachen settled into the heavy silence of his recovery in Thopramkudy, the landscape of Sumi and Sunil’s life in Coimbatore underwent a frantic, calculated shift. The crushing guilt of the hospital encounter, the way Ancy had recoiled from Sumi's touch like it might burn her all over again, had turned their small apartment into a cell of regret.

Ancy’s words, 'For your selfish love, you left your father at home to die,' rang in Sumi’s ears every time the ceiling fan hummed in the city heat.

“I can’t stay here, Sunil,” Sumi said one evening, her voice brittle as she stared at a half-packed suitcase. “Every breath I take in this city feels like I’m stealing it from Papa.”

Sunil stood in the doorway, his hand resting on the frame where the Coimbatore humidity had made the wood swell. He watched Sumi stare at the suitcase, her movements as mechanical as the ceiling fan’s thrum. For months, he had carried his refusal of the Madurai promotion like a shield proof that he could provide on his own terms.

Now, he looked at the typed application for a transfer near Thopramkudy, the one he had hidden under his bank folder. His thumb traced the sharp edge of the paper until it nearly drew blood. He thought of his own father's calloused hands and the "Thurutel Iron" he had tried so hard to match.

"Sumi," he said, his voice catching on the dry city dust. He didn't tell her he was sorry; he simply walked over and placed the transfer request on top of her folded clothes. He let the paper slip from his fingers, watching it settle into the floral patterns of a life they were failing to maintain. "I'm calling Giri. We're going back somewhere near to Thopramkudy."

"Why close to Thopramkudy and why not Thopramkudy itself." Sumi raised her question.

"Are you ready to go back there." Sunil continued "we should give some more time, close also I don't know how close it will be to Thopramkudy."

Sumi looked at him, hope flickering briefly in her eyes. "Will they grant it? You already turned down Madurai."

"I have friends," Sunil replied, though they both knew he meant Giri.

Behind the scenes, Giri quietly pulled the thin wires of his growing political network, ensuring Sunil's application bypassed the usual bureaucratic "dead ends" at the regional office. Within two weeks, the order arrived.

When Giri and Priya finally sat with Sunil and Sumi in the small living room of the new house in Pala — fresh off his transfer to the local branch — the sweet scent of jasmine hung in the humid air, carrying the quiet promise of rain just behind the hills.

"Papa is back at the house," Sumi whispered, recounting the news Mattaikochu had shared. Her voice trembled as she thought of the ICU corridor. "But Amma... she won't even look at the phone when I call. She sees me as the hand that held the knife."

Sunil gripped her hand, his face set with the same quiet grit that had seen him through his baptism-by-fire at the rural branch.

"It won't be today, and it might not be tomorrow," Sunil promised, looking from Giri to Priya. "But we have moved closer to the mountain. We will wait for the mist to clear. It will happen, Sumi. I promise you — sooner or later, the curry leaf finds its way back to the pot."

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23
The Language of the Hills

May 2008

The recovery in Thopramkudy was a slow, silent architecture. Following his discharge, Luckachen spent his days on the veranda, the oxygen concentrator humming a rhythmic, artificial heartbeat that filled the gaps in conversation. The cardamom hills were lush, oblivious to the near-collapse of the family that guarded them.

One evening, as the sun dipped behind Ittichen's ridge, Mattaikochu approached Luckachen with a ledger. But the accounts were merely an excuse.

"Ichaaya," Mattaikochu began, his voice unsteady with a gratitude he'd been sitting on since the hospital. "I never got to tell you properly. While you were away... Ittichen's men came with a JCB. They tried to take the lower stone face."

Luckachen's eyes sharpened, the old military focus returning to his sunken features. "And you stood alone?"

"I wasn't alone, Ichaaya," Mattaikochu said, remembering Giri's warning to keep his name out of the master's ears. "The youth, the same boys who marched against us after that worker died, they came back. They stood in front of the machines. They told Varghese that in these hills, no one cuts the banana when the house is on fire."

Luckachen looked at the ridge, his jaw tightening. He didn't need the name spoken aloud. He saw the "noisy" shadow of Giri in the description, the same boy who had used his voice to take Sumi was now using it to save her inheritance.

"Gratitude is a heavy thing, Mattaikoche," Luckachen said, his voice a dry rasp. "You stood up for my name when my own blood was silent."

Mataikochu continued earnestly. “I also asked them why they spread that gossip about we locking Sumi in a room, after the issue, they looked at me like I was speaking a foreign tongue. They never said it. It was a planned strike, Ichaaya. Someone wanted to destroy the Thurutel name from the inside out.” He wanted Luckachen to know everything.

Luckachen nodded slowly. The "Thurutel Iron" was cold now, but it still possessed the clarity to see the battlefield. He knew then that Ittichen hadn't just wanted his land. He had wanted his soul.

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Inside the bedroom, the air was heavy with the scent of eucalyptus oil and unvoiced regrets. Ancy sat on the edge of the bed, her fingers restlessly smoothing the sheets.

“I saw them at the hospital, Ichaaya,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “I told Sunil’s parents they had received a daughter through a back door while her father bled silence. I called us curry leaves. I was so angry, I prayed to God that no other daughter should ever do what she did.”

She turned to him, her eyes searching his. “But now, my heart is heavy with the way I spoke to them. I was angry because she knew, Ichaaya. She knew you were sick, and she still left you here to die. At least she should have told me.”

She paused, a flicker of resentment crossing her face. “Like daughter, like father. You also didn't feel like telling me. You only told your favourite daughter.”

Luckachen reached out, his hand trembling as it covered hers. “I never told her, Ancy. I meant to tell you all, but only after the wedding. If I had said it earlier, you would have sacrificed her future for my treatment. I didn't want to be the reason her life stopped.”

“Then how did she know?”

“She discovered the documents,” Luckachen admitted, looking at the floor. “She found where I hid them in the office. I gave her a strict military warning: not a word to anyone, especially not to you. I see it now... she only agreed to the wedding because she knew I wouldn't go to the hospital until she was at the altar. She was trying to save me in the only way I allowed her to.”

Ancy let out a long, shuddering breath. “I failed as a mother. I saw her doubts, and I ignored them because I felt she was happy with the Kattapana proposal. I failed to understand the silence of my own child.”

“We both failed,” Luckachen said. “I thought that boy was crooked. But I see now his intentions were not what I thought. He has a good heart, even if his methods lacked the iron.”

Ancy looked at him, surprised. “Whom are you talking about?”

Luckachen didn't answer. He just looked out at the mist, the name of Sunil finally settling in his mind as a person rather than a grievance.

She could hear him not sleeping... the careful, controlled stillness of a man who has decided something and is waiting for the suitable time to act on it.

****

The arrival of Fr. Mathew at the house an hour later felt like a final summons. He sat with them in the front room, the tea cooling forgotten on the table.

“They are in Pala now,” Fr. Mathew said, the transition from small talk to the core of the matter being swift and surgical. “Sunil has been promoted. He requested the transfer specifically to be near these hills. What is your plan for her?”

Ancy looked at Luckachen. Neither spoke.

“She has made a great mistake,” Fr. Mathew continued. “But where is the room for forgiveness in a Thurutel house?”

“Father,” Ancy interrupted, her voice rising. “How can she lie? How can she watch her father gasping for air and still choose to elope?”

“I think the reason for that lie was the man sitting next to you,” Fr. Mathew replied, looking directly at Luckachen. “Your strict warning, Luckachen. You gave her no room to be a daughter; you only gave her the orders of a soldier. She was trapped between your life and her love.” In his heart Fr. knows, he is telling some untruth, but had a bigger aim to achieve.

He leaned forward, his voice gaining a dramatic weight. “Sunil’s father, Ponnachan, came to the pallimeda. He didn't come to demand anything. He came to bow his head. He said his son did a grave wrong and he is ready to do anything for reconciliation. He understands your shame because he has a daughter of his own.”

Fr. Mathew stood up, the crucifix on his chest catching the dim light. “They are waiting, Luckachen. Not for your land, but for your breath. Will you let this shadow in your lungs be the final word of your legacy? Or will you be the oak that finally bends so the new saplings can grow?”

Luckachen gripped the arms of his chair. The silence stretched until the nightjar’s call outside felt like a scream.

“Tell them,” Luckachen said, his voice finally breaking the iron. “Tell them the pallimeda. Saturday. At 4:30 PM Tell us we will come.”

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Saturday arrived.

The pallimeda was quiet when Sunil, Sumi, Ponnachan, and Sunil’s mother arrived at 4:20 PM They stood outside the church first, their shadows long in the late afternoon sun. Sunil’s mother adjusted her saree pleats, her face a mask of quiet resolve. Ponnachan straightened his shirt, his hands trembling slightly. Sumi’s breath came in shallow gasps, her fingers twisting the edge of her dupatta.

They prayed first inside the church — heads bowed, hands folded, the familiar words of the Our Father catching in Sumi’s throat.

Then they entered the Pallimeda.

Fr. Mathew welcomed them with a small smile, his eyes kind but weary. He made them comfortable — tea in chipped glasses, biscuits on a brass plate, chairs arranged in a circle beneath the crucifix. He blessed Sumi and Sunil with a quiet prayer, his hand resting briefly on each of their heads.

"You are all here because love, even when it hurts, is still love," he said softly. "And family, even when it breaks, is still family."

At 4:35 PM, Scorpio entered the compound.

Luckachen driving. Ancy beside him.

Fr. Mathew rushed out to receive them.

Luckachen stepped down slowly, his posture straight but his movements careful. Ancy followed, her saree pleats rustling in the breeze.

They walked toward the pallimeda.

Sumi stood.

Luckachen looked at her, with no visible facial expressions and spoke.

It was not anger. It was not forgiveness. It was truth.

Luckachen's voice cracked, the first time Sumi had heard it break in her entire life.

"You didn't trust me." Not loud. Not angry. Just broken. "After everything, after I taught you the cooperative accounts, after I walked those fields with you explaining every decision. You thought I would say no. You thought I was that kind of father."

“I cherished every moment spent with you,” Luckachen continued. “From the instant the nurse placed you in my arms, you became an integral part of our lives. While my expressions may not have always been adequately conveyed, every decision I made, the choice of land, the establishment of a cooperative, and the valiant struggle, was driven

by the desire to secure your future and grant you the freedom to thrive here."

His hands shook as he gripped the chair. "Did I raise you to be afraid of me?"

"No, Acha — "

"Then why?" The word came out as a sob. This man who had never cried, not when his father died, not when the workers left, this man was crying. "Why didn't you give me a chance to choose you? To stand with you?"

Sumi's knees buckled. She didn't walk to him, she fell toward him, and he caught her.

Luckachen didn't just catch her; he clung to her as if she were the only thing keeping the shadow in his lungs from swallowing him whole. His tears weren't quiet drops; they were the ragged, terrifying sobs of a man who had held his breath for thirty years and finally, finally let it out. The sound was raw, like a wounded animal, echoing against the high wooden rafters of the pallimeda.

Ancy dropped to her knees beside them. Wrapped her arms around both. The three of them — broken, healing, together.

Fr Mathew turned away, wiping his own eyes.

Sunil's father stood, throat working. His wife gripped his hand, and they both knew: this could have been them, this grief, if Dayana had chosen differently.

Five minutes passed in silence broken only by crying. Not pretty crying. Ugly, wrenching sobs that come from years of holding back.

When Luckachen finally spoke, his voice was raw: "I would have welcomed him. I would have thrown a feast for the whole village. I would have been proud to tell everyone: my daughter chose bravely."

"I'm sorry, Acha," Sumi whispered against his shoulder. "I was so scared of losing you that I lost you anyway."

"You never lost me," he said. "Not for one second. Even when I couldn't answer your calls. I kept looking at the screen. All forty-seven of them. Each of those forty-seven times, I didn't just see your name, mole. I sat in the dark and watched the screen glow until it went black again. I held the phone to my ear just to hear the silence on your end, imagining your breath, wondering if you were calling from a place where you were safe, or a place where you were crying for us."

Sunil's father stood. "You are a respected man from Poonjar," Luckachen said. "My relatives have always spoken highly of you. You should have called me. We could have organised this marriage in a respectable way."

Sunil's father's eyes were wet. "I was as surprised as you were," he said. "They came to our house in the evening after marriage. We were left with no choice. But I am also a father to a daughter. I know the pain. I am not in support of what they did."

Sumi released Luckachen and stepped towards her mother.

"I'm sorry, Amma," she whispered. "I was always wrong about you. I thought you only cared about what people would say. I didn't see how much you loved me."

Ancy pulled her close. "I never stopped loving you," she whispered. "Not for one second." Ancy pulled her daughter aside. Away from the men.

Just the two of them.

"Amma — "

Ancy's hand came up, and Sumi flinched.

But it wasn't a slap. It was her mother's palm on her cheek. Gentle. Trembling.

"I was so angry," Ancy whispered. "So angry I couldn't eat. Couldn't pray. I wanted to hate you for what you did to us. For making me the mother who couldn't control her daughter. For all the whispers at church. For your father's health getting worse."

Sumi's tears came again.

"But you know what I realized?" Ancy's voice broke. "I was angry because I understood. Because if I'd had a choice at nineteen, if someone had loved me the way Sunil loves you, maybe I would have run too."

"Amma — "

"I never had a choice, mole. They told me I was marrying Luckachen, and I said yes because that's what girls did. And I grew to love him. I did, I do, but I never had the chance to choose. You did. And yes, you chose wrong by hiding it.

But you chose. And I — "

Her voice shattered completely.

" I'm jealous. I'm so jealous that you got to choose that I've been angry at myself for being angry at you."

Sumi held her mother while Ancy cried, for the life she never got to want, for the daughter who wanted differently, for the complexity of loving someone whose freedom reminds you of your own cage.

Luckachen looked at Sunil.

He did not speak. He simply extended his hand.

Sunil took it. Then Luckachen pulled him into a brief, firm embrace. Just the embrace of a father accepting what he could not change.

Sunil's mother stepped forward and hugged Ancy.

Both mothers cried — quietly, together.

Fr. Mathew watched. He smiled, small, tired, hopeful.

"Smile," he said. "It looks good on all of you."

A ripple of soft laughter went through the room.

The tension broke, not completely, but enough.

Luckachen invited everyone to their house.

They all moved to the house.

The road climbed in slow curves, cardamom leaves brushing the windows on both sides, mist still sitting low over the far ridge though it was only afternoon. Sunil drove behind Ponnachan's car, Sumi beside him, her hand resting loosely over his on the gearshift.

"Forty-two acres," she said, watching the slopes go by like she was seeing them fresh herself. "Cardamom mostly, some pepper on the eastern side. In a good season, cardamom alone can cross forty lakhs. Pepper adds another ten, twelve, depending on the market that year."

Sunil did the arithmetic without meaning to. Fifty lakhs, some years more, against a Probationary Officer's salary that barely touched three lakhs a year, and that salary came with transfer orders, a manager who counted his tea breaks, a life spent renting rooms in towns he had no reason to love.

He thought of Stephen, back in Poonjar, who had never once complained about staying while his older brother went off to "build a career." Stephen, who would inherit the six acres of rubber whether Sunil stayed near it or not.

He looked at Sumi's hand on his. He had taken the bank job for her, back when there had been no other way to prove himself worth waiting for. Now she was already his. The job had done its work and could be let go of without grief.

The car climbed higher, and for the first time, Sunil let himself imagine staying.

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The table was crowded with the feast — steaming rice mounded like the hills of Thopramkudy, chicken curry rich with coconut and spices, pork fry glistening with black pepper, sambar fragrant with drumstick and curry leaves, avial creamy with yogurt and vegetables, fish curry tangy with kokum, and pappad crisp as the winter air.

Seeing Mattaikochu and the maid rushing between the kitchen and dining hall, their faces alight with an excitement they couldn't hide, Sumi's throat tightened.

Sumi looked at the table. It wasn't just a feast; it was a map of her childhood. The chicken curry was made with the extra black pepper she loved; the avial had the specific thickness she used to insist on as a girl. Her mother hadn't just cooked. She had written a letter of forgiveness in the only language she had left, the scent of spices and the heat of the stove.

“They had been preparing for this day. For her return.”

A bitter taste filled her mouth, sharper than the tamarind in the sambar. I am the worst daughter any parent could have, she thought, her fingers tracing the edge of the tablecloth. My cowardice, my failure to see the real love my parents gave me, every wrong choice I made has hurt them more than I can ever repay.

They ate together.

Small talk, the weather, the harvest, the cooperative’s next steps.

No big speeches. No promises.

Just a family, broken, bruised, but sitting together again.

As the meal progressed, the clatter of spoons against steel plates slowing, Luckachen set down his glass of water with deliberate care. The room seemed to hold its breath as he cleared his throat, his voice carrying all his years when he spoke, without him trying to.

"If you all permit," he began, his gaze sweeping over the gathered faces, "I have a request to make. It is my wish that Sunil and Sumi return to our home. My health..." here, the voice faltered just slightly, "has not been what it once was. And the work we began, my daughter and I, needs their hands, their hearts, to carry it forward."

A heavy silence settled over the table. The only sound was the distant call of a nightjar from the cardamom fields outside, its cry the only sound loud enough to fill the silence in the room.

Ponnachan, his face carrying its own regrets, finally broke the quiet. His voice was rough with emotion as he spoke.

"What my son has done... he deserves whatever comes." He paused, his fingers tightening around the edge of the table. "You have every right to punish them both for what they have done. But if it is your wish that they return, then I am in agreement. It is only fair."

The air in the room seemed to thicken, the scent of the feast now mingling with the heavier, unspoken emotions that filled the space. No one moved. No one spoke. The moment hung suspended, like the first monsoon clouds over the hills — heavy with promise of what was coming.

Later, clearing the table, Mattaikochu saw the papers still open on the office desk, a lawyer's letterhead from Kottayam, Sunil's full name written in beside Sumi's, in a line that used to hold only the word "heir."

"Ichaayan always knows what needs to be done for the family," he murmured to himself, and went back to the kitchen.

As people were leaving, Mattaikochu stood in the kitchen doorway watching Sumi laugh at something Sunil said.

She glanced over. Saw him.

"Mattaikochu Chetta," she said softly, walking over.

He turned away. Wiping his eyes roughly.

"I called you curry leaf," he said, voice thick. "I said terrible things.

Because I was angry. Because you hurt Ichaayan, and he's been more than employer to me — he's been friend, brother, everything."

"I know."

"But you're my mole too," he said, turning to face her. "Since you were this high." He held his hand at waist level. "I carried you on my shoulders. I drove you to school every day. I taught you to identify pepper by touch. And when you left — "

He broke.

"I felt like I'd failed. Like I should have seen it coming. Should have protected Ichaayan from that pain."

Sumi hugged him, this man who had been more uncle than driver, who had kept the estate running during the worst months.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "And I'm home now. If you'll still have me."

"Mole," he said, "I never stopped." Mattaikochu was not able to finish his words.

“I know, my deeds had brought the worst for our house, Mattaikochu Chetta, please… look at me as that same little girl who made a mistake. It wasn't a rebellion; it was just a cry from a heart that didn't know how to speak.” Sumi clutched him tightly, her tears soaking into the familiar cotton of his shirt.

****

Before leaving, Sunil looked at Luckachen.

"We’ll be back," he said. "In two days."

Luckachen nodded. "Bring her home," he said quietly.

The vehicle pulled away. The mist rolled in.

The hills watched. And somewhere in their ancient silence, they remembered that some wounds heal slowly.

But they do heal.

And some love — even when it breaks hearts — finds its way home eventually.

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24
The Hand that Guides

2009

The Kerala Assembly election was scheduled for the second week of April, and the air in Thopramkudy hummed with a tension thicker than the pre-monsoon heat. The constituency had always been a UDF stronghold, Christian votes, cooperative networks, old family loyalties, but this time, the wind carried whispers of change. MLA Thomas, aspiring for another term, had money, connections, and the usual machinery of power. But the party leadership in Thiruvananthapuram was uneasy. Thomas's name had been whispered too often in corruption cases, illegal quarrying, money laundering through proxies, links with Ittichen. The state committee had received strict directions from the national leadership: 30% of seats must go to new faces, youngsters, clean images. Thopramkudy was one of those seats.

Ittichen and Thomas met at the farmhouse one humid evening, cigar smoke thick in the air and under it, something that smelled like defeat. Thomas's fingers drummed against the armrest; each tap a countdown to the end of an era. "I tried everything," he said, his voice low and rough. "Even offered money to the national general secretary. But they're not budging. They want a new face."

Ittichen stared at the ridge lights in the distance, the glow of the quarry fires flickering like dying stars. "If we lose this seat, everything stops," he said. "The quarries. The contracts. The influence." His voice was quiet, but the threat beneath it was clear.

Thomas nodded. "We need someone acceptable. Young. From our side. Someone who won't ask questions."

They discussed names. After an hour, they settled on Theresamma, newly elected zilla panchayat member, wife of their silent partner at

the Munnar farmhouse. She was safe. Loyal. Would not disturb the machinery.

The local youth group leadership was asked to forward two names. One was of Giri.

****

Giri's friends gathered at his house that evening, their laughter and slogans filling the air like the scent of firecrackers after a temple festival. "From college general secretary to cooperative bank to panchayat to assembly, Giri is unstoppable!" they chanted. Their voices raw with youthful exuberance. They brought plates of diamond cuts from the new bakery, bursting crackers that sent dogs barking through the neighbourhood, their slogans — "Giri for MLA! Youth Power!" — echoing off the tin roofs like a challenge to the old order.

Giri sat on the veranda, smiling faintly, but his eyes were distant. "I don't think it will happen," he said quietly.

His friends laughed. "What are you saying? The youth are with you. The party needs fresh blood."

Giri looked toward the ridge, where the last light of the day painted the cardamom hills in shades of gold and shadow. "Luckachen will not allow it," he said. "You saw what he did in the panchayat election. One small smile, one quiet word, and I was out."

The room quieted. Someone muttered, "He can't stop the party."

Giri shook his head. "He doesn't need to stop the party. He just needs to speak. And when he speaks, people listen."

Priya called later that night. She was home, preparing for UGC-NET. "You sound worried," she said.

"I am," Giri admitted. "If Luckachen opposes, it's over. He's respected. The cooperative has given him a reformer image. Good family connections across the panchayat. If he says no..."

Priya was quiet for a moment. "Should I speak to Sumi? Ask her to convince him?"

Giri exhaled. "No. Let it be. If it's meant to happen, it will. If not… I'll accept it."

****

Luckachen thought about the names been considered for assembly election — Theresamma and Giri. He thought of the boy's defiance, his idealism, the way he had stood by Sumi when no one else would. Giri was reckless, yes. But he was honest. And honesty was what this place needed.

To Thiruvananthapuram, Luckachen made a call. He did not use his mobile. Some conversations needed a landline instead, the formality of a number nobody to trace back to anyone that easily. Some conversations required the past.

He drove to Kattapana, found a quiet landline at a friend's house, and dialled the state general secretary, Ramesh, also the Home Minister. They spoke for fifteen minutes. No greetings. No small talk. Just facts.

When Luckachen finished, Ramesh said, "Send the file to me tomorrow. 11:30 AM"

Luckachen ended the call. He looked at the hills outside the window, the mist rolling in like a silent army. Then he called Sunil.

"Pack a change of clothes," he said. "You leave for Thiruvananthapuram at 5 AM tomorrow. You have an appointment with the Home Minister at 11:30."

Sunil was silent for a second. "Papa… what should I say?"

"Nothing," Luckachen said. "Just hand him the cover I give you. And don't use your mobile after you leave. No calls. No messages. Not even to Sumi."

Sunil understood. He did not ask why.

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The next morning, Sunil left at 5 AM with a sealed envelope handed over by Luckachen.

At 11:30 AM, Sunil entered the Home Minister's chamber alone.

Ramesh looked up from his file. He smiled, small, knowing. "Sit, Sunil."

Sunil handed the envelope. Ramesh opened it. His eyes scanned the pages, bank statements, quarry permits, witness statements, money trail documents. Everything linking Thomas and Ittichen.

Ramesh closed the file. "Wow," he said softly. "So much data. Your father-in-law has done a great job."

Sunil swallowed. Ramesh looked at him. "Who is Giri?"

Sunil hesitated. "My friend. From college. He helped us... when we needed it."

Ramesh nodded. "My friend Luckachen is recommending his name for candidature. I think the local leaders have already zoomed in on Theresamma. But..." He smiled again. "My friend has asked for help for the first time in thirty years. I won't forget that. I am the Home Minister. I will get his wish done."

Sunil's heart pounded. "So Giri will get the seat?"

Ramesh's smile widened. "Tell Luckachen the seat is his to give."

Sunil left the chamber. He wanted to call Giri immediately. He remembered Luckachen's words. He controlled himself. He drove back in silence.

****

At the party office in Thopramkudy, the final meeting was in progress. The mood was tense. Most leaders above 50 supported Theresamma — experience, loyalty, safe choice. The youth pushed for Giri — energy, youth, symbol of change. But for assembly election, the decision has to come from State Party committee.

The party secretary's phone rang. He picked up. The room fell silent. The call was from the state general secretary. No one heard the other side. They only heard the secretary's replies.

"Thank you, ji." "Right choice." "We will ensure the win." "Will the name change?" "Jai Hind, ji."

He cut the call. Sat down. Smiled.

All eyes on him.

He looked around the room. Then he said: "We have directions from state leadership. We should start working for the upcoming election."

Everyone waited.

"Who is the candidate?" someone asked.

The secretary's smile widened. "Giri."

The room erupted. The youth shouted slogans. The elders exchanged glances, some disappointed, some resigned.

****

In the farmhouse, Ittichen's cigar snapped between his fingers. The phone call from Triuvanathapuram had been clear: Giri was the candidate and Theresamma would not file as an independent. Thomas's face was grey in the dim light, his empire crumbling like the quarry walls after a monsoon. The party's decision was final, unanimous, and most crushing of all, backed by the Home Minister. When he hung up, his hands shook. Not from anger. From what he'd just heard.

Now, he sat across from Ittichen in the dimly lit study, the glass walls, once a symbol of Ittichen's unassailable power, now reflecting only the flicker of the dying quarry fires below. His suit was rumpled, his tie loose, as if the news had physically undone him. The whiskey in his glass remained untouched.

"They've made their choice," Thomas said, his voice hoarse. "Luckachen played this better than we expected. The Home Minister is with him. We're out."

Ittichen's fingers drummed against the armrest of his chair, a staccato rhythm of controlled fury. The room echoed with silence, the hum of power that had once filled it replaced by the hollow sound of abandonment.

"The quarry permits," Thomas continued, his gaze fixed on the floor. "The renewal applications. The new government's environmental review board will flag every single one. They're coming for us."

A muscle twitched in Ittichen's jaw. He stood abruptly and walked to the window. Below, the quarry fires still burned, but dimmer, uneven, like a dying man's breath. Half the crew had vanished overnight, their tools and loyalty gone with them. The remaining workers moved with hunched shoulders, glancing over their shoulders as if waiting for the axe to fall.

"The contractors?" Ittichen asked, though he already knew.

"Pulling back," Thomas confirmed. "They don't want to be associated with complications."

Ittichen let out a slow breath, his fists clenching at his sides. "This room," he said, his voice low and raw, "once hummed with ministers and deals and promises. Now it's just silence."

Thomas didn't answer. There was nothing to say.

"I built this," Ittichen said, turning to face him. "From nothing. My parents scrubbed floors in Luckachen's father's compound. I made myself into something."

"You did," Thomas agreed, his voice barely above a whisper. "But times change."

Ittichen's eyes burned into him. "Times change because weak men let them change."

A long silence stretched between them. Outside, the wind howled, rattling the glass walls like a warning.

Thomas cleared his throat. "The party's formally withdrawing support. No more protection, no more funding. We're on our own."

Ittichen laughed, a bitter, hollow sound. "On our own? We are the party in this district. Or we were."

"Not anymore," Thomas said. He pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. A news alert glowed: "UDF Backs Giri Rajan for Thopramkudy: 'A New Era of Leadership'."

Ittichen snatched the phone from his hand. The headline blurred as he read the details, the Home Minister's endorsement, the words "transparency" and "accountability" thrown around like weapons. He tossed the phone onto the table. It clattered, the sound sharp in the stillness.

"They're not just dropping us," Ittichen said, his voice cold. "They're throwing us to the wolves."

Thomas nodded, his face ashen.

Ittichen walked back to the window. The quarry pit yawned below, its edges ragged, its depths shadowed. It looked abandoned already.

"Weak men," he said again, quieter now. "Weak men let this happen."

Thomas stood, his chair scraping against the floor. "What do we do?"

Ittichen didn't turn. His reflection in the glass was distorted, warped by the rain streaking down the panes. For the first time in decades, he looked small.

"We remind them," he said, his voice a blade, "what happens when you cross Ittichen."

Thomas stared at him. "How? The party's gone. The money will go. The men will go."

Ittichen turned, his eyes dark. "Then we burn it all down before we let them take it."

Thomas didn't move. The air between them was heavy with what was about to happen.

Outside, the quarry fires flickered, dimming with every passing second.

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The party office was a whirlwind of noise and colour, sweat and cheap incense in the air, the walls shaking with shouts and slogans. Giri sat frozen in the centre of it all, his hands clenched on his knees, his mind struggling to catch up. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

He had imagined this moment a hundred times, the announcement, the cheers, the sense of vindication, but never so early.

His friends swarmed around him, their faces alight, their voices a cacophony of congratulations and laughter. They pulled him up, patted his back, shoved phones into his hands, calls from reporters, party workers, strangers. He smiled, he nodded, he shook hands, moving on autopilot from the back of the room toward the stage, where the party president waited, beaming. His own phone buzzed endlessly in his pocket, but he ignored it. The world outside had faded into a blur. He was somewhere else — lost in the echo of a decision he hadn't seen coming.

"We have to go now!" one of his friends shouted, gripping his arm. "Luckachen's house! We have to show him! It's not his choice anymore — it's ours!"

Giri hesitated. "No — "

But they weren't listening.

Fifteen young men, fuelled by triumph and youthful defiance, dragged him toward the door.

Someone had scrawled his name on a bedsheet in bold, uneven letters:

GIRI. OUR MLA.

They hoisted it high, their voices rising in a raging tide of Zindabad! calls. The march spilled on to the street, a living, breathing thing swallowing the narrow roads of Thopramkudy. Shope keepers stepped out, old women waved from balconies, children ran alongside, grinning. Giri walked in the centre, smiling, shaking every outstretched hand, calling people by name even as the roar of slogans drowned his voice. His fingers ached from gripping, his cheeks hurt from smiling, but he didn't stop. He couldn't.

They reached Luckachen's house just as the sun dipped behind the hills, casting long shadows across the veranda. Luckachen was already there, standing straight, his hands clasped behind his back. He didn't move as the crowd halted in front of him, their shouts dying into an awkward silence.

" Luckachen Chetta!" one of Giri's friends called out, breathless. "Giri is the candidate! You can't stop it now!"

The words hung in the air, heavy and clumsy. Giri looked at Luckachen. The old man's face was unreadable, but his eyes — sharp, tired, knowing — held his. And in that gaze, Giri saw it all: the years of fights, the silent sacrifices, a battle he'd never fully understood even while he was fighting in it.

Then, on their way back, just about to reach the gate of Luckachen's house, Giri's phone rang.

A landline number. He almost ignored it. But today, of all days, he answered.

"Alliya?" Sunil's voice was low, urgent.

"Where are you? Why are you calling from this number?"

"I'm at Luckachen's house," Giri said, distracted. "What's wrong? Why aren't you calling from your mobile?"

Sunil hesitated. Then, quietly, he told him: The early morning drive to Thiruvananthapuram. The meeting with the Home Minister, the File, the decision. "Luckachen arranged it all" Sunil said.

Giri's breath caught.

"What?"

The sound was loud. It carried across the veranda.

Luckachen heard it.

The word exploded out of him, raw and disbelieving, It cut through the silence on the veranda, sharp as a blade. Luckachen's head turned, just slightly, but Giri knew he had heard.

He turned.

Luckachen stood there, still as stone, his expression unchanged. But Giri saw it, the flicker of something in his eyes. Pride, yes. But also warning. Don't.

Giri's chest tightened. He wanted to run to him. He wanted to fall at his feet. He wanted to say, "Thank you. I didn't know. I — "

He took a step forward.

Luckachen raised his hand.

Just once. Just a small gesture.

Don't.

He turned away from Luckachen, but he did not immediately walk back toward the crowd. He stood at the edge of the veranda for a moment, facing the cardamom hills, the phone still warm in his hand.

He had spent six years building toward this. College strikes and cooperative bank meetings and panchayat canvassing and a hundred small rooms where he had stood and argued and persuaded, believing — needing to believe — that the seat, when it came, would be proof of something. Proof that a boy from a clerk's family on the quiet side of the ridge could move the machinery of the world through the force of his own conviction.

But the machinery had been moved by a phone call from Kattapana. Made from a landline. By a man who had every reason to let him fail.

He thought about the march. He had been so certain that morning — the banners, the chanting, the feeling of standing at the front of something righteous. He had not stopped to ask whose story he was walking into. He had aimed his voice like a weapon and never checked the target. And the man now standing behind him, whose back he could feel without turning, had absorbed that weapon quietly, without flinching, and then — when the time came — had chosen to give him a future anyway.

Why?

He knew the answer. He did not want to know it, but he knew it.

Because Luckachen had looked at him the way a farmer looks at difficult ground, not with contempt, but with assessment. Reckless, yes. Honest, yes. Worth the risk of cultivation.

Giri had always assumed that trust was something you earned by being right. He understood now, with the cold clarity of a man standing in the wrong direction at the right moment, that the deeper trust was given to people who had been wrong — visibly, publicly, consequentially wrong — and had not run from it. Luckachen had watched him march. Had watched him help Sumi leave. Had watched him stand for the panchayat seat with the borrowed confidence of someone who did not yet understand the ground beneath his feet.

And had chosen him anyway.

Not despite all of it. Because of it.

The crowd was singing his name now, the sound swelling up the road toward the veranda. He felt the pull of it, that old gravitational force, the roar that made a man feel large. But underneath it, quieter and more permanent, was something he did not yet have a word for. Not humility exactly. Something closer to the feeling of receiving a thing you know you will spend the rest of your life trying to deserve.

He straightened. He put the phone in his pocket.

Don't, the old man had said. And he wouldn't. Not yet. He would carry this privately, the way Luckachen had always carried the things that mattered most — not as silence, but as ballast.

He turned back toward the noise.

Behind him, his friends erupted again, lifting him onto their shoulders. The world tilted, the sky and earth blurring as they carried him back toward the town. His chest swelled with pride, with the roar of his name in the air, but beneath it, deep and gnawing, was the truth.

This wasn't his.

The victory wasn't his. The fight hadn't been his. The trust of these people, the hope in their eyes, he had earned none of it.

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His phone rang again. Priya's name flashed on the screen. He couldn't ignore it. He raised his hand, silencing his friends, and stepped slightly away from the roar of the "Giri for MLA" slogans.

"Be ready to marry an MLA," Giri said, forcing a smile into his voice, though the "bitter taste" of the arranged victory remained.

Across the distance in her room in Bhubaneswar, Priya leaned back against her desk, the cold glow of her laptop screen reflecting in her eyes. As she heard the news, a wave of profound relief washed over her, heavier than any academic triumph. She realized that if the candidature had been granted, it was more than just a political move, it was a silent signature of forgiveness from the hills. The 'Military Iron' had finally bent, signalling that the cold war is over.

"I'm already watching the news scroll, Giriyetta," she said softly, her voice steady.

"But don't think a seat in the Assembly makes you the only leader in this house. I just got my PhD defence date. By the time you take your oath in Thiruvananthapuram, you'll be marrying a Doctor of Physics. If you're going to represent the land, don't stay small. I'm moving at the speed of light."

Giri was silent for a heartbeat. The bitter taste dissolved, replaced by a sharp, familiar pride.

He realized then that their "Degree of Distance" wasn't a gap, it was a partnership of two people who refused to stay small.

"I'll keep up," he promised, his smile finally reaching his eyes for the first time that day.

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On the veranda, Luckachen watched them go. His lips curved, not a smile of triumph, but of quiet certainty. The mist was rolling in, soft and relentless, erasing the last of the daylight. He knew, as he always had, that some battles were never about the leader. They were about the land, the people, the slow, stubborn work of healing.

Sumi and Sunil would carry the workers.

Giri would fight for the hills.

And justice for Biju? That, too, would come. Not today. Not tomorrow. But it would come.

The hills stood in silence, as they always had. They watched. They remembered.

And in their ancient, patient way, they waited.

Some wounds heal slowly… but they do heal.

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Epilogue

Curry Leaf Returns

2010

The monsoon had washed the hills clean, leaving the earth dark and hungry. The cooperative's first vanilla harvest had exceeded even Luckachen's quiet hopes — small, glossy pods, their scent rich with memory, sold for record prices in Kochi. The families had lined up to receive their shares, their fingers trembling as they counted the notes, their laughter carrying across the slopes like wind through cardamom leaves. The stone face, once a looming threat, now stood draped in vanilla vines, its edges softened by time and stubborn roots.

Luckachen sat on the veranda each evening, his frame thinner since the surgery but his back still straight, his military bearing undimmed. The cough that had racked him for years was nearly gone, though his steps were slower, his pauses longer. He walked the lower slope with Mattaikochu at dusk, checking the plants, listening more than speaking. The workers no longer flinched at his approach; they met his gaze now, nodded when he spoke, asked his advice. He had learned, finally, what silence could do – both the damage and mercy of it.

Ancy had returned to the kitchen. The scent of ginger-honey tea curled through the house, mingling with sambar simmering on the stove. She still sat by the window sometimes, her rosary beads clicking, her gaze fixed on the ridge where the mist gathered at dusk. But she spoke now, short sentences, quiet jokes, even laughter when Mattaikochu teased her about the new vanilla prices. The sound was rare and precious, like the first monsoon rains after a long drought.

They did not mention Sumi often. They did not need to.

Her calls came every Sunday, her voice steady, her questions careful: "How is the harvest?" "Has the rain come?" "Is Papa's cough better?"

Luckachen's replies grew longer with each call. Ten minutes. Sometimes fifteen. They talked of the cooperative, the weather, the new drying sheds. Never the past. Never the pain.

But they spoke.

The cough that had haunted him for years – dry, relentless, a shadow in his chest – had faded almost entirely. The medicines helped, yes, but it was more than that.

It was the return of laughter in the house, the quiet hum of Ancy's voice in the kitchen, the way the land itself seemed to breathe easier now that the quarry fires were cold.

"Your happiness and your reduced stress brought your health back," Fr Mathew had mocked just last Sunday, clasping his shoulder after mass. "Or was it the vanilla prices?"

Luckachen had only smiled, tapping his chest where the ache used to live. Some wounds, he knew, healed from the inside.

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Three valleys away, in Thopramkudy's town square, a crowd roared as Giri stood on the makeshift stage, the election results flashing on a projector screen behind him:

GIRI RAJAN – WINNER, THOPRAMKUDY CONSTITUENCY.

Priya pushed through the jubilant throng, her eyes bright with unshed tears. He saw her and pulled her into a tight embrace, lifting her off her feet. The crowd cheered — "Giriyettan's chechi!" — but he only had eyes for her.

"We did it," he whispered into her hair.

She pulled back, her hands on his face, her smile trembling. "No, dear," she said. "You did it."

But they both knew the truth.

This victory was not his alone.

It belonged to the workers who had marched, the families who had trusted, the man who had fought silently from a veranda in the hills.

A reporter thrust a microphone toward him. "First words as MLA, sir?"

Giri glanced at the ridge, where the last light of day caught the cardamom hills. "The land chose me," he said. "I'll spend every day proving I'm worthy of that trust."

Priya squeezed his hand. She knew what he left unsaid: And I'll spend every day making sure you do.

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In a damp, windowless room at the sub-jail, Ittichen looked down at his palms, where the thick, dry ridges of skin from his early labour remained as a map of his ambition. He leaned against the damp, sweating wall of the cell, and the chill that seeped into his bones was identical to the one he had felt as a boy, watching his mother scrub the stone floors of the Thurutel compound.

For a lifetime, he had tried to bury that coldness under layers of granite, money, and power, but here, the "new money" had finally run out of places to hide.

He closed his eyes and, for a fleeting second, didn't hear the jailer's keys, but the ghostly clatter of biryani trays falling into the red mud of a narrow hill road, the exact moment he had traded his soul for a victory that had now left him with an empty house and a dark cell.

Ittichen sat across from his lawyer, the fluorescent light casting harsh shadows on his gaunt face.

Many charges were stacked against Ittichen: Illegal quarrying, labour violations, Raju's death, Money offer to Biju and family. "They have Biju's wife's testimony," the lawyer said, flipping through papers. "The CBI report. The bank records."

Ittichen didn't flinch. "And?"

"And," the lawyer leaned in, "Raju's family withdrew their complaint this morning."

Ittichen's head snapped up.

"The compensation was generous," the lawyer added, careful. "But it wasn't money that changed their minds."

Outside, the rain drummed against the bars. Ittichen stared at his hands, the knuckles scarred from years of gripping power.

"Who?" he asked, though he already knew.

The lawyer hesitated. "Luckachen. He met with them. Offered them to be part of the cooperative."

Ittichen laughed, a bitter, broken sound. "Of course."

The lawyer lowered his voice. "This isn't over. We appeal. We delay"

"No," Ittichen said. He stood, his chains rattling. "Tell them I'll take the sentence."

The lawyer stared. "You're giving up?"

Ittichen looked toward the hills, invisible beyond the jail walls. "Some debts," he said, "aren't paid with money."

****

The Scorpio's engine sputtered to a stop in the driveway. Sunil turned off the ignition, his hands gripping the wheel. Beside him, Sumi clasped a small packet wrapped in brown paper, the first dried vanilla pods from her experimental plot in Pala, grown from seeds Luckachen had given her years ago. The scent was earthy and deep. It smelled like memory and the promise of return.

She had cut her hair since Pala, the shorter style framing a face that was both older and younger, older for the worry lines that had faded, younger for the light that had returned to her eyes.

The gravel crunched under their feet, the sound sharp in the evening quiet. Luckachen was already on the veranda, seated in his chair, his fingers resting on the armrests. Ancy stepped out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her mundu, her eyes flickering from Sumi to Sunil and back.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Sumi stepped forward. She placed the packet on the table beside her father.

She had driven the last twenty kilometres with her hands folded in her lap, watching the hills reassemble themselves through the windscreen — ridge by ridge, familiar as a face she had been trying not to remember. She had told herself she was calm. She had told herself she had prepared for this. She had even rehearsed something to say, standing in the kitchen in Pala at six that morning, some sentence that would open the door without forcing it.

She had rehearsed nothing that prepared her for the sound of the gravel under her feet.

Or for the sight of him in the chair, smaller than she remembered, or perhaps the chair was the same size and she had simply forgotten what it looked like to see him still. Her father had never been a man who sat. He had always been in motion, checking the estate, working the ledger, standing at windows with his coffee growing cold. The stillness of this version of him, arms on the rests, watching her walk across the gravel, was the thing that broke her open before she had said a single word.

She had not left because she had stopped loving him. She had always known this. But she had not known, until this moment, that he had always known it too, that the stillness in his face as she walked toward him was not the blankness of a man withholding judgment, but the careful, controlled composure of a man who had been waiting, and who did not trust himself to speak yet.

He missed me, she thought. The knowledge arrived not as absence but as something else entirely – being loved by someone who'd never learned to say it plainly and who had spent a few years sitting with the silence of it while she learned to breathe in a different house.

She placed the vanilla packet on the table. Her hands were steady. She was her father's daughter.

"From the first harvest," she said, her voice quiet but steady. "I thought you should have some."

Luckachen looked at the packet. He did not touch it. Instead, he looked at his daughter, for the first time since the day she left this house with Sunil.

She was still his mole, his girl. But she carried herself differently now, with a quiet confidence that hadn't been there before.

"You came," he said.

She nodded. "I wanted to be here," she said. "In this land. The place I grew up. The place I still love."

Sunil stood a step behind her, his hands folded, his eyes lowered in respect. He had learned, in these months, what silence actually costs – and what it can also hold.

Luckachen looked at him, then nodded.

"Sit," he said.

They sat.

Ancy brought tea — strong, with extra ginger, the way Sumi liked it. She placed the tumblers on the table, then sat beside Luckachen, her shoulder brushing his.

The evening light was soft, golden, the kind that made the cardamom hills glow like fire. The mist was thin, a veil rather than a shroud, and the air smelled of damp earth and distant rain.

They drank in silence.

Then Luckachen spoke.

"The cooperative is doing well," he said. "Eight more families next season. The vanilla is selling high."

Sumi smiled — small, tentative, but real. "I learned from you, Acha."

He nodded. His gaze drifted toward the ridge, where the last light of day caught the edges of the hills. "The land remembers," he said quietly. "It remembers everything."

Another silence. The kind that was not empty, but full of words unspoken, of years missed, of love that had never really left.

Then Ancy spoke.

"You look well," she said to Sumi.

Sumi's eyes filled. "I missed you, Amma."

Ancy reached over. She took her daughter's hand. "I missed you too," she said.

Sunil watched. He did not speak. He did not need to.

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Later, when the light faded and the mist rolled in, they walked the lower slope together. Luckachen and Sumi in front, Ancy and Sunil a few steps behind, Mattaikochu following at a distance, his hands in his pockets, his smile wide.

They did not speak much.

They simply walked through the cardamom plants, past the vanilla vines, past the stone face that had once threatened to destroy everything but now stood as a testament to what had been rebuilt.

When they returned to the veranda, Sunil sat on the veranda steps, watching the evening mist begin its slow, familiar crawl across the cardamom terraces. In his right hand, he held a steel tumbler of ginger tea, the metal hot against his skin.

He looked down at his palm, tracing the thick, dry ridges of skin along his fingertips. These were no longer the soft hands of the physics student who had once daydreamed in the Erattupetta laboratories.

Those hands had been meant for theory and textbooks. These current hands were different, they were instruments of the "plain" world. They had been calloused by the unrelenting friction of bank ledgers, the dry

heat of Palakkad and Coimbatore, and the thousands of ink-stained forms he had navigated during his "baptism-by-fire."

When Luckachen approached, his own steps slower but his back still straight, he did not look at Sunil's face. Instead, the old man's gaze fell to Sunil's hands as he accepted a fresh ledger from the younger man.

Luckachen reached out, his own calloused fingers, hardened by decades of cardamom tapping and army service, brushing against Sunil's. There was a momentary pause, a silent communication between two men who now understood the same language of labour and sacrifice.

"Your hands have weathered the plains, Sunil," Luckachen said, his voice no longer a dry rasp but a steady acknowledgement. "They have the grit required for this soil. You are no longer just a guest in this house; you are a partner of this land."

Sunil tightened his grip on the tea tumbler, feeling the "Thurutel Iron" in his own resolve. He had returned to the hills not as an "orphan of his choices," but as a man who had built a foundation of his own, ready to take on the mountain itself.

"Next harvest," Luckachen said, his voice low but firm, "you don't need to wait. If that job is chaining you, leave it. Both of you come back now. The cooperative needs hands that care, your hands. The families here depend on it. And so do we."

Sunil's throat tightened. He had spent months drowning in spreadsheets and bank politics, his mind always drifting to the cardamom slopes and vanilla vines of Thopramkudy. He looked at Sumi, who nodded — almost imperceptibly, but with certainty.

"We'll come," Sunil said, his voice steady. "Acha."

He had rehearsed it once or twice during the long drive back from Pala, quietly, under his breath, like a man learning a prayer in a language he had not grown-up in. But it had sounded borrowed then. Now it did not.

He thought about the boy he had been in the quadrangle at St George's, the one who had stood frozen, watching, telling himself the silence was wisdom when really it was just fear wearing a sensible face. That boy had spent the next six years trying to become someone worthy of the girl who had simply walked in. He had not realised, until this moment on this veranda, that the journey had never been about her. She had always known who she was. The journey had been entirely his own and it had led him not to her world, but to himself.

He was not the same man who had walked nervously to a hostel gate with jasmine garlands sweating in his hands. And he was not the man he had needed to become to be accepted here.

He was, for the first time, simply Sunil, Sunil from the Ponnekuttu family, Sunil who tapped his own bark now, Sunil who knew what his hands were for.

That was enough. That had always been what was required.

Luckachen's nod was small, but his eyes held something new respect. The kind that wasn't given lightly, but earned through time and trust.

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Luckachen turned toward the ridge one last time. The lights across the valley were distant and small, likes stars fallen to earth.

He stood there a moment longer than was necessary.

He had spent his whole life being the man who turned away first, from sentimentality, from softness, from the things that could not be held in a ledger or measured in a harvest. He had believed this was strength. He had taught his daughter to believe it too.

He understood now that she had taken the lesson further than he intended. She had applied his own discipline to the one decision he had not prepared her to make, the decision to leave. She had stood alone, the way he had raised her to stand, and she had chosen. He had no one to blame for her courage. He had built it.

This had taken him a long time to see. Ancy had seen it immediately, of course. Ancy always saw the things that cost him the most to look at.

He watched Sumi's back as she walked toward the house, the set of her shoulders, the particular straightness of her spine that had nothing to do with posture and everything to do with what she had learned to carry. She walked the way soldiers walk when they have come back from somewhere difficult and have decided not to talk about it. He recognised the gait. He had seen it in the mirror for thirty years.

He felt something move through his chest. Not the old tightness of the cough, that was nearly gone now. Something else. Something that had no military term and no word in the estate ledgers.

He did not have a name for it. He let it be.

She came back, he thought, simply.

She came back.

He turned back to the house.

Ancy followed.

Sumi and Sunil followed.

Mattaikochu brought fresh tea, the steam curling into the cool evening air.

They sat together.

The mist rolled in.

The hills watched.

And somewhere in their ancient silence, they remembered:

Some love returns slowly, like the monsoon to the parched earth.

Some justice comes quietly, like the first green shoot after a fire.

But they return.

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