

THE UNTOLD AND *The unseen*

VOICES BEYOND REALITY

A book by
Mustakeen Mushtaq
And Salika Samoon



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Stories Matter
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Foreword

By Assistant Professor Suhail Qamar (Teacher, Mentor & Guide)

It is with great pride and joy that I write these words for my student, Mustakeen Mushtaq, on the publication of his book. To see a young scholar venture into such a profound and complex theme is truly rewarding for me as his mentor.

The central idea of this work rests upon the notion of paranormality—that mysterious realm of experience which people often sense yet cannot easily explain through reason. This book does not attempt to impose a rational framework upon such experiences; rather, it seeks to give expression to the feelings and voices of many of us who encounter the unexplainable but struggle to share it with others. In this way, the work is both thoughtful and humane, bridging the world of imagination with the realities of lived experience. Mustakeen's effort reflects both intellectual curiosity and creative courage. I am confident that this endeavour will mark the beginning of many more valuable contributions from him in the years ahead. I extend to him my heartfelt congratulations and best wishes for continued growth as a writer and thinker.

To the readers, may this book encourage you to reflect on your own unseen and unspoken experiences, and inspire you to give voice to what often remains silent.

Assistant Professor Suhail Qamar

Foreword

By DDC Chairperson Pooja Thakur

It is my pleasure to write the foreword for this book by Mustakeen Mushtaq, a young author from Kishtwar. Having seen his earlier works, I have observed his dedication to exploring diverse themes through storytelling. This fictional anthology presents a collection of imaginative stories that reflect creativity and thoughtfulness.

Such works encourage readers to explore new ideas and perspectives, making reading a meaningful and engaging experience. I wish Mustakeen Mushtaq continued success in his literary journey and look forward to his future contributions.

Pooja Thakur DDC Chairperson

Preface

Every story is a world in itself sometimes shaped by lived experiences, sometimes woven from imagination, and sometimes born out of unusual dreams that linger long after we wake. This anthology is a humble attempt to bring together such diverse voices, ideas, and emotions under one roof.

When I first announced this project, I received stories in many forms—some handwritten, some recorded as audio, some translated from local languages, and many in raw formats. Each contribution carried honesty, creativity, and the courage to express. With the help of my co-author and literary companions, these raw narratives were refined, edited, and carefully shaped into the book you are now holding.

The purpose of this anthology is not just to publish stories, but to create a platform where contributors can be recognized, where their voices can travel beyond social media and reach readers across India and beyond. Every page reflects the passion of individuals who believed in the power of storytelling and chose to share a part of themselves with the world.

As the project head and compiler of this anthology, I am deeply grateful to each contributor for their trust, patience, and creativity. This book is a collective effort—a reflection of teamwork, dedication, and a shared dream to keep the culture of writing alive in today's fast-changing world.

I sincerely hope that readers find in these pages not just stories, but connections—moments that resonate, inspire, and stay with them.

Mustakeen Mushtaq

Author & Project Head

Special Thanks

1. To My Co-Author

Ms. Salika Samoon

This project would not have reached completion without your constant support and hard work. Every story you refined, every suggestion you gave, and every effort you put in has left a mark on these pages. You carried this vision as your own, refined stories with dedication, and ensured the book became a polished masterpiece. Thank you for being a true partner in this journey.

For all your hard work, sincerity, and belief in this dream, I will always remain grateful. This book carries your imprint, and I am proud to share its authorship with you.

2. To My Literary Companions

Ms. Nida Heer, Mr. Suhaib, Mr. Irfat Latief, Ms. Sumeera Nabi.

Every project needs a backbone of support, and for me, that support came from my Literary Companions. You stood as the silent strength of this anthology refining, reviewing, and polishing the stories with care. Your role in editing, reviewing, and polishing stories has been nothing less than remarkable. Each effort of yours has added depth and clarity to this book. Thank you for walking this path with patience and sincerity.

3. To My Financer

Ms. Minakshi Sharma and Ms. Tabassum Kouser.

Dreams need both vision and support to take shape. While I had the vision, you provided the trust and support that made this anthology possible.

Your belief in this project went beyond financial help—it was a statement of faith in me and in the contributors of this book. Without your backing, this idea might never have grown into a published reality.

This book stands today as a testament not only to the stories it contains but also to the generosity and belief that you placed in it. Thank you for being the pillar that held this dream steady.

4. To My Friends.

Mr. Basit Ali and Mr. Sajid Markazi

Some contributions cannot be measured in words, yet they remain the most powerful. Dear friends, your constant encouragement, motivation, and unwavering belief in me have been a light throughout this journey.

At times when the project seemed overwhelming, your support reminded me why I started in the first place. You stood by me with positivity, giving me strength to continue and complete what once seemed impossible.

This book carries not just my effort but also the energy of your encouragement. I will always remain grateful for your presence in this journey.

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Part I:

Whispers in the Dark

The Midnight Visitor

Poem by: Shezra Ashraf

The arm of clock hit twelve but the house stood still
Whether turned heavy and air cold and chill
Gloom surrounded the earth and moved across the floor
In the dead silence faintest whisper echoed more
The curtains weathered so fast without presence of wave
As if whispering the name of mine is near to grave
The creaked door was locked yet someone crossed shore
Each step warmed me—death is outside my door
No key had turned, but the stepping drew so near
The shadow moved and I felt my end is here
A ray from Sun lightens my room and wakes me up
As if denying the dream that midnight had lit up
In the chaos of my heart a question still lingers strange but true
Did I dream of worlds or did they dream of you.

About Shezra Ashraf

My name is Shezra Ashraf, and I am an 11th grader from Pulwama. I began writing poetry in Class 7 as a hobby, but over time it has become an integral part of my life. I write to give voice to the unspoken thoughts that quietly dwell in my mind. Through my poems, I reflect on life and the lessons learned from people around me, hoping readers discover a part of themselves and realize that our strength comes from what we believe we can be. Every person holds a unique path of their own.

Between 2:30 and 3:00 AM.

By Saba Firdaus

Every night before sleep, I whisper the same prayer: "Please, God—not tonight. Don't let me wake in the dark. Don't let me open my eyes until sunrise." But prayers, I've learned, have no power against what waits for me.

That night was no different. I felt the darkness before I even opened my eyes—thick, suffocating, and unnatural. I kept my eyes shut, pleading silently: "Please let it be morning. Please let it be four o'clock; let the night be almost gone." I tried to keep my eyes closed, but my eyelids betrayed me. They opened slowly, unwillingly, and landed straight on the wall clock. It was 2:49 a.m. At that exact moment, my soul left my body. I closed my eyes. Panic erupted. Without wasting a second, I tried to turn toward the wall to bury myself under the blanket, but my body was drenched in sweat. Every cell shivered.

After a while, I felt I was alone in the room, though I didn't know how or why the blanket seemed to be pulled away. Then my gaze landed on the chair near my study table. When I struggled against the tension on the fabric, I saw her on the chair – a woman draped in a white saree. Wrinkles had turned her face into something monstrous. Yet her eyes—oh God, her eyes—glowed in the shadows, unblinking, fixed on me with a hunger that made my throat burn.

She did not scream or call out, nor did she run. She took another step toward me. Not a single sound or word came out of my mouth. I could not move an inch. Tears blurred my sight. I shut my eyes, praying she would vanish.

Instead, something crawled onto the bed. My blanket tightened over my body as if invisible ropes had tied me down. The weight grew heavier until my limbs begged for relief. I couldn't move, and I couldn't breathe. I wasn't alive anymore.

Against all the forces, I opened my eyes again. She wasn't on the chair anymore— she was beside me. Her face was inches away from mine, and her dark eyes pierced so deeply into me that I felt my soul peeling from my bones. My tears ran into my ears. My body begged to thrash, to scream, to kick, but it lay on the bed as still as stone. Then suddenly something broke. I don't know how, but that thing left me.

I tried, without wasting a second, to rush from the bed, but I felt something dragging me back. I swear it wasn't just fear— something was aggressively trying to stop me. Every step felt like running for water, but somehow I reached Mama's door. I threw it open and collapsed inside, sobbing so violently I could barely breathe. Mumma, grabbed me, pulled me against her chest, and whispered again and again:

"It's okay, Beta, calm down. It was just a normal dream. Nothing else."

I want to believe her, God, I want to. But even in her arms, with her warmth around me, the truth burned inside me. Those eyes

were still in my head. That wasn't a dream. Dreams end when you wake up, but this always begins after I open my eyes.

And every night, between 2:30 and 3:00 a.m., it comes back. Sometimes in her wrinkled face, sometimes in the appearance of a dead relative, and sometimes in all white. Always different, always watching.

I wish Mama believed me. I wish someone believed me. Because I know those aren't dreams.

It is their time. Their hour.

And I am the one they choose to wake.

About Saba Firdaus.

Saba Firdaus

From the very start, I've been a quiet observer of the world — a true introvert. When strange or unusual things happened, I often kept them to myself, finding solace only in writing. My diary became a safe space for my thoughts, fears, and experiences, and the piece included in this anthology was written between 2:30 and 3:00 AM, straight from those pages.

Originally from Bihar and now living in Delhi, I am pursuing a B.A. in Geography at Jamia Millia Islamia. While I am gradually learning to open up to the world, writing has become a part of my life — one I intend to carry with me forever.

Echoes in the Dark

By: Asma Khurshid

Nights in my village have always been too quiet for comfort. The silence here is not gentle—it is heavy, like a weight pressing against your chest. Even the smallest sounds—an owl's call, the creak of wooden beams, the whisper of wind against the glass—grow sharper, as if the darkness itself listens more closely than daylight ever could. For years I had been afraid of the dark, but fear of darkness is different when you live surrounded by it. The street outside my window has no lamps; beyond our house, the fields go on endlessly, swallowed by the shadows of tall trees. When the moon disappears, the blackness outside is absolute. I used to comfort myself with small routines: locking the door twice, pulling the blanket over my head, whispering prayers until sleep caught me. But one winter night, something changed.

That night, silence was not silence anymore—it was alive. I had fallen asleep easily, exhausted from studies and chores. Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke—or at least, I thought I woke. My room looked the same: the wooden wardrobe stood against the wall, the window was misted from the cold, and my books lay scattered on the study table. But there was something new in the air. A whisper. At first it was faint, like the dragging of footsteps across a floor. But as I listened closely, in the stillness of the night, I began to hear strange sounds—the windows opening and

closing, the wardrobe shifting on its own, the soft rustle of pages being torn from my books one after another. My heartbeat quickened. It wasn't outside. It was inside. Inside my room. Then came another sound—something scratching against the wall. A slow, deliberate scraping, like someone tracing invisible patterns with broken fingers. I froze. I glanced toward the wardrobe, the study table, the corners. Empty. Yet the sound grew louder, circling me. That was when I saw it. A shadow. It stood near the window. At first, I thought it was just the trick of moonlight, the shape of a tree outside. But then it moved. Slowly. Very slowly. As though it wanted me to watch. It was tall, its head brushing the ceiling. But it had no face—no eyes, no mouth—only a darkness deeper than night. And then, a twisted laugh echoed. The sound entered my ears and refused to leave. Even when it stopped, the echo remained, buzzing inside my skull. I wanted to scream, but no sound left my throat. I tried to move, but my body felt pinned to the bed, as if invisible hands pressed against my chest.

The shadow began to walk toward me. Each step was a weight against the floor, each movement accompanied by a sound—crackling bones, scraping nails, whispering breaths. It stopped beside my bed. Its presence pressed against me, heavy and unreal. Its fingers drifted close to my ears, as if in a dream. A piercing sound exploded—the screech of nails across glass, doors slamming, children crying somewhere unseen. The noise entered me, echoing again and again until I thought my skull would split. The last thing I remember before darkness swallowed me was its whisper: “From these echoes, there is no escape.” I woke gasping for breath. My body trembled with fear, my hands shivering. My

room looked ordinary again—the wardrobe, the study table, the books. No shadow. No sound. For a moment, relief washed over me. Just a dream, I told myself. Just another nightmare. But then—the voices returned. They weren't in the room now—they were in my ears, echoing. The shadow's voice had been right. Even awake, I could still hear it.

That entire day, the echoes never left me. In class, while listening to my teacher, I could hear faint whispers curling between words. While walking through the market, footsteps followed mine though no one was behind me. That night, I was terrified of sleeping. I kept the lights on, sat upright with my books, tried to distract myself with reading. Midnight came, then one, then two. My eyes grew heavy. At last, I drifted into uneasy sleep. The dream returned. This time, the shadow stood at the foot of my bed. No longer distant. "Have you heard the echoes?" it asked. Its voice wasn't sound anymore—it was inside my thoughts, speaking from within my head. I shook, tried to scream, but my mouth produced only silence. The shadow stretched its arms. Its fingers touched my skin, and it wasn't the touch of a human. All at once, my room sank into a darkness unlike anything I had ever known. "You dream me because I am real," it whispered. Cold sweat covered me, and my breath faltered. The weight of countless hands tightened around my throat, stealing my breath away. I struggled, but each hand tightened like chains around my wrists and ankles.

The shadow laughed again, that same impossible laugh that filled my ears with shattering echoes. I thought I would lose my mind. And then—darkness. I woke screaming. I found myself alone in the room. Looking around, I checked the windows, the door, the

walls—everything seemed to be in its place. Suddenly, from deep within the wardrobe, came a sound, as if something inside was crashing and breaking apart. I rushed out of my room and went to the bathroom to freshen up, as I was getting late for school. That day, I couldn't focus on anything. The echoes grew louder. Not just in my ears now, but in the classroom, corridor, park. Doors creaked when no one touched them. Windows rattled though the air was still. Once, I heard laughter in the kitchen when I was completely alone. I began to wonder: was I still dreaming? Or had I already crossed into some half-reality where dreams bled into waking? By the third night, I had lost all sense of peace. I feared both sleeping and waking. I feared silence, for silence was no longer empty. That night, I prayed longer than ever before, but prayers felt like whispers drowned in the storm. Exhaustion dragged me into sleep again.

This time, the shadow did not wait. It stood beside me the moment I opened my dream-eyes. "You cannot hide. You cannot escape. You are the echo," it whispered. The world around me shattered. I felt the bed beneath me sinking deeper and deeper, as if it were pulling me into some endless abyss. Darkness swallowed everything around me, so thick that even when I forced my eyes open, it felt as though they were sealed shut forever. I couldn't hear my own heartbeat, but the air around me echoed with a twisted outcry of laughter and screaming, tangled together like a sound not meant for human ears. Then again, it pressed its hand against my throat. The pressure was unbearable, not physical but suffocating the soul itself. I tried to breathe, but the sound of my gasp was stolen. I thought I would die. But then, something

strange happened. The shadow's form flickered. For a second, it wasn't a shadow at all—just me, lying helpless on my bed. The figure that haunted my dreams and followed me into the daylight was nothing but a ghost born out of my own mind, my own hallucination. I couldn't believe it—the figure I had feared so much was nothing but my own madness. I woke with a shock, ran my hands across my neck and arms, convinced the bruises would be there— but there was nothing. No mark, no wound. They say dreams don't leave scars—but they do leave shadows.

About Asma Khurshid

Hailing from the town of Anantnag, Asma Khurshid began her journey with writing in 2016, during a time when schools were closed and life stood still. What started as an outlet for thoughts and emotions soon grew into a steadfast companion. Currently pursuing a B.A. (Honours) in Political Science at Amar Singh College, Srinagar, she continues to blend academic learning with her deep passion for expression and storytelling.

The Unusual Sound

By: Mustakeen Mushtaq [Author]

While collecting these stories, I realized something surprising—I am not the only one who has faced such experiences. Many others have gone through similar incidents. To me, these contributors are not just writers; they are companions on this journey. Together, we are connected through this anthology, each of us sharing personal encounters that blur the line between the real and the unexplained. This project began with a sound—a strange, unusual sound that first stirred my curiosity.

What is sound?

Why do some sounds terrify us?

My dedication to starting this project came from that very sound. I cannot fully explain it, but it entered my life when I first realized that there are presences around us, we cannot always see. Sometimes we only hear or feel them, and yet remain clueless about what is really happening. As the youngest child—the pampered one—I always slept beside my parents. But one day, my father said, “You’ve grown up now. It’s time you had your own room.” Usually, children are happy when they get their own space. I was the opposite. I resisted, argued, even cried, because the thought of sleeping alone terrified me. No matter how much I tried to convince my parents, their decision was final. That night was

the last time I slept in their room—wide awake, dreading the next morning. The following day, with my mother's help, I moved into my new room on the ground floor. My uncle and aunt lived opposite me, and our rooms shared a common washroom. At first, I tried to adjust. One night, while watching horror stories on my phone, I dozed off. Around midnight, I suddenly woke up to find my phone still on. As I rubbed my eyes, I heard the sound of a motorcycle. But my room was at the back of the house, where no vehicle could possibly pass. I brushed it off and went back to sleep. The next morning at breakfast, I narrated the incident to my family. They were shocked but dismissed it, thinking I had imagined it because of watching too many horror videos. Still, I couldn't stop wondering—who was that biker? In the following nights, things grew stranger. Once, I distinctly heard the sound of a train rushing through the corridor outside my room. My heart raced—I was terrified. I checked through the window, but nothing was there. The sound came again. Trembling, I pulled the blanket over my head until sleep finally returned. Another night, determined to stay awake, I scrolled through reels until my eyes grew heavy. Eventually, I drifted off. Again, a sound woke me—but this time, it wasn't a motorcycle or a train. It was the sound of a child walking. The distinct chappal footsteps of a little kid echoed in the corridor, back and forth, at least fifty times. Horrified, I froze. Who could it be at such an hour? In the morning, I decided not to tell anyone. But unexpectedly, my grandmother spoke at breakfast: "Last night, when I went to the washroom, I heard a child walking in the corridor." Everyone froze. All eyes turned toward me. Finally, I had proof. I smiled in relief and said,

“See? I wasn’t lying!” But instead of believing me, they dismissed it again, teasing that I was only supporting grandmother’s imagination. Over the next few days, the sounds continued. At first, they terrified me, but slowly I became used to them. My sister, too, admitted she sometimes heard them. Eventually, my family considered shifting me back upstairs, but I refused. I told my mother, “Changing my room won’t solve anything. This isn’t about where I sleep.” Years passed. I moved to Kashmir for further studies. The sounds remained behind—fading into memories. Now, only I, my sister, and my grandmother remember them. Sometimes my sister calls me and says, “I heard it again last night,” and we laugh together, recalling the nights that once filled us with fear but today feel almost nostalgic. What those sounds truly were, I still don’t know.

A mystery. A presence.

Or perhaps just an illusion. But one thing is certain—those sounds changed the way I see the world forever.

About Mustakeen Mushtaq

Mustakeen Mushtaq is the author and Compiler of this anthology. His own contributions—“The Unusual Sound,” “The Sound Returned,” “The Hall of Whispering Women,” and “The Vanishing Night”—provide a foundational narrative framework for this diverse collection, showcasing a keen understanding of suspense and atmosphere.

The Sound Returned

By Mustakeen Mushtaq

It wasn't me this time—my cousin became the target of the sound. Ironically, this was the same cousin who had once laughed at me for sharing my strange experiences. It was the season of our eighth-class exams. When the date sheet was released, I chose a room on the first floor to study. But instead of studying late into the night, I often wasted time scrolling reels. It wasn't that I never studied—I did—but as the exams drew closer, my habits betrayed me. One evening, I decided to watch a movie. As usual, I bought all kinds of snacks and arranged them neatly, ready to enjoy. My cousin's house was visible from the window of the room where I studied. Everything was calm until my phone began ringing. It was my cousin. At first I ignored it—I didn't want to pause my movie. But when he kept calling again and again, I picked up, irritated. "What is it? Why are you calling me at midnight?" I snapped. What I heard on the other end silenced me completely. My cousin was crying. "Calm down and tell me what happened," I said, stunned. After a pause, his voice trembled: "From my room... I keep hearing the sound of payal—anklets." I thought he was joking, so I laughed. But the laughter froze in my throat when I myself began to hear the faint jingling of anklets. The sound grew clearer, weaving through the night. "Look toward the window," my cousin whispered. When I turned, my heart nearly stopped. In the dim

light I saw someone in my cousin's room wearing anklets, twirling—just like Chandramukhi. My body froze, then panic exploded.

I screamed so loudly that words cannot describe the terror. And in that very moment, I suddenly woke up.

Was it just a dream?

A Voice Still Echoing in My Ears

By Muntaha Rashid

It started like any ordinary evening. My brother and cousin came home late. At first, I thought they were simply tired, but then I noticed something was wrong: their eyes glowed with a strange crimson light. A cold knot of dread tightened in my chest. By morning, both of them were down with fever and a cough. The unease that hummed beneath the surface of the house only grew louder.

That night, I slept fitfully. Between four and five a.m., as the Azan rose and fell across the neighbourhood, I woke suddenly. I was fully awake—not the foggy, helpless kind of wakefulness that comes from a bad dream, nor the sleep paralysis I had experienced before. This was different: clear, alert, and oddly calm, as if every sense had been sharpened to listen.

Then my limbs went numb. I tried to move, to lift my hands, to blink, but my body refused. The room around me felt unnaturally still, as though the air itself had thickened. And then, a voice called my name. It wasn't a whisper. It wasn't even human. The sound filled the room with a pressure—too loud, too resonant to belong to anyone I had ever known. It rolled over me like a wave, leaving my spine prickling with cold. My hair stood on end. For a moment, terror replaced thought.

As the final syllables of the call to prayer faded, I began to recite verses from the Holy Book. Each word was a foothold. With every verse, I felt the weight on my chest lift, the numbness faded away.

When I finished, movement returned. Relief washed over me so suddenly it felt like the first breath after a long-held inhale. Even now, the timbre of that voice lingers in my memory—a tone I cannot name or mimic, only remember as something utterly wrong. From the moment I saw the crimson light in my brother's and cousin's eyes, I knew the night would not be ordinary. That encounter confirmed the dread I had carried, and it remains a quiet, chilling reminder that there are things beyond our understanding, waiting in the darkness between prayer and morning.

About Muntaha Rashid

Muntaha is a budding poet with a love for expressing thoughts and emotions through verse. Her poetry reflects her imagination, feelings, and experiences, offering readers a glimpse into her inner world. Though still exploring her craft, she writes with sincerity and passion, making her contributions a meaningful part of this anthology.

The Graveyard of Echoes

By Sumeera Nabi

All my life, I believed fear was just another fleeting emotion—something that lived inside the mind and faded with courage. But I learned it was far more insidious. Fear was not only in the heart; but it could seep into the very marrow of your being, altering the way you breathed, thought, and existed. And yet, among all these blessings, there exists one shadow that runs against the grain of our nature and that is fear. It can be destructive, and yet strangely, it can also be the spark that drives survival. I once believed that fear belonged only to the weak-hearted. But then it came for me and I realized it could cripple anyone. My life, until then, had been unremarkable. This is my truth, an experience that has burrowed into my soul. Though my roots lie in a rural town, I was born and raised in the city where my parents had migrated before I came into this world. My siblings and I adapted to a new world of schools, routines, and ordinary joys. Nothing in my early years hinted at the darkness that would one day engulf me. It began on an ordinary visit back to my hometown. I remember being excited, wearing my best clothes, smiling, looking forward to a simple picnic with my brother and some local children. But the moment was ached the old picnic spot an abandoned school, now little more than a ruin—something in me shifted. I do not recall what I

did there, who I spoke to, or even how the hours passed. The entire memory is blank, as though it was stolen from me.

My brother later told me strange details that I had suddenly struck him in anger over something trivial, and that I had acted as though I wasn't myself. None of it remains in my mind. When we were turned home, illness overcame me. Fever, nausea, and a weight I cannot describe. My parents assumed it was exhaustion. Medicines were prescribed, but nothing truly healed me. Days later, my father decided to take me to a revered shrine in the town, watched over by a Sufi caretaker. The man's gaze lingered on me as soon as I arrived. He whispered to my father that something was "disturbed" within me. I was too young to understand, but I remember the way he recited verses over me and blew gently upon my face. Within days, I began to recover. I thought it was over. I thought life had resumed its natural rhythm. But shadows do not release their prey so easily. Years later, when I had grown older, the strange episodes returned—this time darker, heavier. One winter night, the kind where the air feels too still, too watchful, with guests staying over, I lay in a warm room with my family when it struck. A coughing fit seized me, followed by choking, as though invisible hands were pulling my soul through my throat. My vision blurred, my voice locked inside me. I collapsed into unconsciousness while my mother and brother shook me in panic. I heard them, yet they sounded far away, muffled, like they were calling from behind a wall of water and the ceiling above me bent and swayed like it was alive. The following nights grew worse. Every night between one and two o'clock, the same suffocating grip would return. Doctors found nothing. My family feared the

heater, then the air, but even with windows open and everything turned off, the attacks came relentlessly. For over a month, I lived as if each night would be my last. At last, desperately, my parents sought the guidance of a religious scholar. He told us something that froze our blood—what was haunting me had not come from nowhere. It had followed us from my hometown. It had clung to someone I loved and entered our home through them. My brother confessed that before coming back, he and my cousin had wandered through the very ruins where my first episode began. This religious scholar gave us amulets, verses to recite, but little changed. Finally, he recited directly over me, gave me blessed water to drink, and in that instant, the heaviness lifted. My lungs filled as though with first breath, my eyes cleared, and for the first time in months, I laughed. The world seemed alive again. Yet as we left, my brother said I pointed out two identical girls walking ahead of us and two doves perched nearby. He swears there was nothing there. For a long while afterward, I lived in peace. I believed it was truly over. I clung to that belief the way drowning man clings to a piece of driftwood, desperate for it to carry me back to normal life. But fear is patient, it does not vanish; it waits. It burrows quietly, like roots hidden beneath soil, and you go on living above it, pretending the ground beneath your feet is stable.

During my board exams, the episodes crept back. My behaviour changed, I abandoned school and tuitions without reason. I recoiled from people—even my own family disgusted me with their presence. I spent days alone, in silence, staring at the walls, my once lively voice now strange to my own ears. It was then I learned a darker truth: some things did not merely wound a

person—they hollowed them out, leaving behind an empty shell that only pretended at life. Time itself no longer felt like hours or days; each moment stretched into centuries. I felt as though I was crawling across existence like a worm beneath the soil, bound to one place, condemned to relive the same instant forever. It felt as though something was coiling under my skin—a slithering movement I could not see, but I could feel. When you glimpse another's face within your own reflection, when strangeness coils itself around your very being, when invisible imprints appear upon the walls around you—what else can that be, if not fear itself made flesh? The voice of that creature roared through me, not only in my mind but in every vein, every nerve, until it seemed to own me completely. For years, I feared that I was no longer a home for myself—but a dwelling place for it. That body had been mine, or so I thought, yet I did not recognize the thing that wore my face. Its breaths were shallow, foreign, as though they were borrowed from some unseen intruder. When it moved, it was not I who moved. When I whispered, it was not my voice that answered.

The world worshipped the light, but there were some—like me—who could only find rest in the shadows. In the corners where silence pooled, in rooms where the air grew thick and cold, I felt the truth pressing close. It was there, in the dark, that something had waited—something that had always waited—breathing in rhythm with me, sharing that body, claiming it piece by piece. At night, it seemed as if something pressed down upon me while I slept. Even in the solitude of the bathroom, I could sense a touch that was not mine—so real that I would turn around in panic, only to find emptiness staring back. My family would tell me that in my sleep I muttered strange words, and that sometimes, in the

middle of the night, they would find me sitting upright, silently staring at the door as if expecting someone to walk through. For years, this fear stripped the colour from my life. I never wore bright clothes, never stepped out to wander freely. The darkness sank so deep into me that even moving from one room to another became an ordeal, as though these wraiths themselves were waiting to consume me. This is my truth. A life shadowed not by imagination but by something that came uninvited—something tied to the ruins of a forgotten school and the unspoken secrets of my own bloodline. People say fear exists only in the mind. But I know it can take shape, linger in spaces, follow your home, and wait for years before striking again because some places never forget the ones who enter them. And some echoes... never let go. And if you ever find yourself near an abandoned place where laughter once echoed but silence now reigns, do not forget that fear might already be waiting there, listening, watching, choosing who it will call next. —Written within the cage of trauma and suffering.

About Sumeera Nabi.

Sumeera, from the breathtaking valley of Gurez, joined this project with her story *The Graveyard of Echoes*. Having completed her Master's, she is currently on a pause from studies and work, taking time for reflection. Through this anthology, she found both an opportunity to express herself and a platform to connect with other creative contributors, making the journey deeply rewarding.

Ghostlight In the Monsoon

By Nida Heer

I was standing in front of the mirror, slowly combing my hair. The afternoon was cold, and the air felt heavy. Outside, rain fell hard, striking the ground and windows so loudly that it drowned out every other sound.

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind rushed through the window. With a loud bang, the window flew open, and rain sprayed into the room. The wind was so wild and forceful that I had to push with all my strength to close it. After a struggle, I finally managed to shut it, but my shoulders were already soaked.

I picked up a towel and began drying myself. As I wiped my arms, I suddenly felt the towel being pulled from behind. My heart skipped a beat. I spun around quickly...

But no one was there.

I tried to ignore it and went back to drying my wet skin. But then, it felt like someone suddenly tugged at my hair. I froze, my heart skipping a beat. I glanced at the window and saw that it had opened again, pushed by the wind.

Why won't this window stay closed?

I walked over and shut it again, pressing it tightly this time. But just as I turned around, I felt something, like a hand, touch my shoulder.

I didn't look back. I just stood there, frozen, my heart racing...

"Hey! What are you doing here by the window?" Emma called out. "It's stormy outside, and you're just sitting there like nothing's happening."

I let out a long sigh. "Oh, Emma... you scared me! When did you get here?"

"I just came. I was on my way, but it started raining, so I hurried. By the way, the front door was wide open. Why didn't you lock it? Anyone could've walked in."

"Oh... it probably flew open because of the wind."

"Hmm. Sit down. I'll make you some coffee."

"Alright."

She sat down at the wooden table, the one with the green flower vase placed in the centre. I walked into the kitchen to make coffee. As I started, I suddenly heard the faint sound of footsteps. I turned around quickly, but no one was there. I shook off the feeling. It's just in my head, I told myself. This storm, this weather, it's playing tricks on me. Strange sounds seemed to echo from every corner, but I blamed the wind, the rain, the thunder. I poured the coffee into two cups and walked back toward the table. "Hot coffee for a cold, rainy day," I said with a smile. But when I looked at the table, Emma was gone.

“Emma? Where did you go?” I called out. She must’ve gone to the washroom, I thought.

I waited. Five minutes... ten minutes... fifteen? But she didn’t return.

Growing a little uneasy, I walked toward the washroom. “Emma?” I called softly. “Are you okay?”

No answer... I knocked again, but as soon as my hand touched the door, it creaked open slowly on its own. The washroom was empty.

I looked around, confused.

“Where did she go?”

I began checking every room in the house, calling out louder each time.

“Emma? Where are you?”

“The coffee’s getting cold!”

Still nothing.

I went upstairs, checking room by room, all the way to the top floor. Finally, I reached the last slab, the one just below the attic.

“Emma?”

No one. Just silence.

I hurried back downstairs, my heart pounding. I checked the front door, it was shut, firmly closed. And Emma was the one who had closed it.

A chill ran down my spine. Fear was starting to creep in.

With trembling hands, I carried the coffee cup back to the kitchen. My mind raced, my chest tight with unease.

But as soon as I stepped inside, I froze.

Blood... thick, dark red blood was flowing from the kitchen sink. My breath caught in my throat. I couldn't move for a moment. Then, slowly and carefully, I stepped closer, trying to understand what I was seeing.

There was no sound except the rain outside... and the slow, steady drip of blood.

Just then, Crash!

Glass shattered behind me. I spun around. A glass had fallen from the cupboard and smashed on the floor. Shards scattered everywhere, glinting under the dim light.

My heart was pounding. My hands felt cold. Something was wrong, terribly wrong.

I stood there, shaken, trying to make sense of what was happening. What is going on? I whispered to myself.

I knelt down to pick up the broken glass. As I gathered the pieces, one sharp shard slipped deep into my palm. Blood immediately poured from the cut. But I didn't flinch. I pulled the shard out calmly, as if I didn't even feel the pain, and dropped it into the dustbin, still dazed, barely aware of what I was doing.

Then I turned back toward the sink, and froze.

It was clean. Spotless. No blood. No trace of anything that had just happened.

My breath caught again. My head felt light. Did I imagine it? Had it ever been there at all?

I walked out into the lobby, my heart thudding like a drum.

As I turned my gaze toward the staircase...

My eyes widened. Blood, thick, dark blood, was spilling down the steps, flowing endlessly and soaking into the floor below. Panic rose in my chest. Something was very, very wrong.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. My heart skipped a beat. Slowly, nervously, I walked toward it and opened it. Maybe it's Emma, I thought.

But it wasn't.

A man stood there, soaked from the rain, wearing a black coat and trousers. Water dripped from his sleeves, and he clutched a plastic folder tightly, trying to protect it from the downpour.

"Who are you?" I asked, hesitantly.

He gave a polite nod and said, "It's raining heavily. I'm sorry to bother you... but here are the papers for your new house."

He held out the folder.

"Miss Emma signed this property over to her stepsister, Sneha, before her death," he continued calmly. "Sneha instructed me to hand these over once your payment was complete. I was nearby when the rain started, so I rushed to keep the documents safe."

I took the folder from him, still trying to process what he was saying.

He turned to leave.

“I’ll be going now,” he said.

But something inside me stopped him. “Wait,” I said, turning back to him. “Emma... was she Sneha’s sister?”

“Yes,” he replied with a soft sigh. “Her stepsister. A sweet, quiet girl. But... she suffered from depression. I heard her business failed. She... took her own life.”

A chill ran down my spine. My fingers tightened around the folder. Emma was dead?

I stood frozen in the doorway, the storm still roaring behind me, but inside... an even greater silence had begun to spread.

I started thinking. Maybe Emma never came. Maybe it was all just in my head, the rain, the loneliness, the storm, it could’ve all confused me. I spent the whole evening trying to make sense of it, but nothing helped. Everything around me looked completely normal.

Later that night, I went to bed. I switched on the night lamp, loosened the grip in my hair, and let it fall over my shoulders. I changed into my night suit and crawled under the blanket, ready to sleep.

Just as I was about to close my eyes, I felt something. Someone, or something, was tugging at my blanket. I yanked it back quickly. But again, the tug came, stronger this time.

Startled, I sat up in bed and looked around. No one.

My room was quiet.

A thin layer of sweat had formed on the back of my neck. I took a deep breath, turned off the light again, pulled the blanket over myself, and tried to sleep.

But then, I felt pressure on my feet, like someone was gently pressing them, as if giving a foot massage.

I immediately sat up, flicked on the light, and froze.

Emma was sitting on my bed. Right at my feet. I stared at her, stunned.

“Emma...? How... how did you get here? You came earlier too... and then you disappeared.”

She looked up at me with a soft smile. “I was here... just went for a walk in the rain.”

“But... you’re soaked! You should’ve told me. I was worried,” I said, rushing to get a towel. “Here, let me dry your hair.”

But before I could touch her, she jerked back.

“No. Don’t touch me.”

She lowered her eyes. “No, no... I’ll do it myself,” she whispered.

Something in her voice didn’t feel right. Something in the air around her had shifted. And suddenly, I wasn’t sure anymore... if the girl sitting on my bed, was really Emma.

“Okay, dry your hair,” I said with a small smile. “I’ll go make some coffee. You’ll catch a cold like this.”

“Okay,” she replied softly.

Emma was supposed to be a new friend. She said she lived in the next lane and often visited me in my new house. But she always looked a bit lost... like something was bothering her.

I went to the kitchen and made some hot coffee. When I came back to the room...

Emma was gone.

“Why is this girl playing hide and seek with me?” I muttered to myself.

“Emma? Where did you go?” I called out. But there was no reply.

Then, I saw something in the mirror. Emma’s face. She was there, staring. I spun around quickly, no one was there.

I looked back at the mirror again. Emma was still there.

Smiling.

I screamed. Everything went dark. I fainted.

The next morning, I woke up. Everything looked normal. But I didn’t feel normal. I felt confused... broken.

Later, Sneha came over.

“I forgot one of my files here,” she said.

“Come in,” I replied.

I wanted to tell her about Emma, but before I could, she suddenly said, “Emma was my stepsister. She died by suicide after her business failed. I still miss her sometimes...” I was shocked.

“Oh,” Sneha replied. “That Emma was my classmate. She studied with me.”

She found her file and was about to leave.

“Wait, want something to drink?” I offered.

“No, I’m getting late,” she said, and walked out.

But then I noticed her watch had fallen on the floor.

I bent down to pick it up and saw that the hairdryer was open.

Why is it open? I wondered. I tried to close it, but the handle broke.

The front part fell off, and something slipped out.

There was an old photo inside. I picked it up and froze.

That face. Those eyes. That hair.

It was Emma. Why was her photo here? In this house? In the dryer?

Well, she was Sneha's friend and classmate too, so maybe there could be a photo.

Just then, Eliza came in.

“Hey, how are you?” she smiled.

“I’m fine,” I said, still confused.

She noticed the photo in my hand. “Let me see,” she said.

She looked at it and went quiet. “Oh... Emma,” she said sadly.

“She was such a sweet girl. I still don’t understand why she killed herself.”

My eyes widened. “This Emma?” I asked. “Yes... She’s Sneha's friend or classmate?”

Eliza laughed softly. “She’s Sneha's sister.”

“What?”

“Yes, her stepsister.”

“But... Emma is not dead,” I said. “She comes here. I talked to her. She says she lives

I was shocked again.

“No! I saw her... she was here just last night!”

Eliza said slowly, “You should talk to someone. Maybe you’re imagining things. It could be stress... or maybe a mental illness.”

She stood up and left quietly.

I sat there, confused and scared. That evening, I went to the washroom to wash my face. I looked in the mirror...

Emma was standing behind me... smiling. I gasped.

“Emma? What is going on, Emma?”

Emma reached out from the mirror, trying to wipe the blood from my forehead... but she couldn’t touch me.

Suddenly, I heard a sharp, painful scream.

I froze in fear. I didn’t understand what was happening. Then, Emma disappeared again.

On the mirror, written in blood, were the words:

“Help... I am in pain.”

I slowly raised my hand and wiped the mirror. Tears streamed down my face. I was shivering.

Then, a voice echoed in the air:

“Do justice to me... I’m suffering... Please...”

I shouted, “Emma?! What’s happening? What is all this? Please tell me!”

Then, in front of me, Emma appeared, but not like before. She looked like a spirit... a ghost in pain. Her clothes were torn, blood covered her body, cuts lined her face, her long hair soaked in blood, and her eyes overflowed with tears.

She looked at me and said,

"Do justice to me... I didn't kill myself... I was murdered."

I stood there, shaking.

"Who... who killed you, Emma?" I asked.

I stepped forward to hold her... but I couldn't touch her. She was just a soul, just a spirit.

She began crying loudly.

"Help... Help..."

Then she spoke in a soft, broken voice:

"This house was mine... my own. Sneha was my stepsister. After our parents died, I was only nineteen, and I felt completely alone. So I adopted Sneha and raised her like my own sister. But one day... I caught her red-handed... with my fiancé. She could've told me if she loved him. Why did she have to kill me?

She forced me to sign all the property papers... then murdered me. After that, she told everyone I had committed suicide because of a business loss. She took away half the company's money. The

staff didn't get their salaries that month. She told everyone I was depressed and that I had killed myself.

She sold this house, bought a new one, and got married. But I was dying that day... suffering in pain... bleeding from the kitchen sink to the stairs. She put my blood on her face and celebrated. Nobody heard my screams... only the sound of the rain."

And now... whenever it rains... I wake up again. Crying... shouting for justice. But no one ever listens. You... you're the first girl who has ever felt me in this house.

"Please help me... please..."

And with those words... she disappeared.

I called out, "Emma?!"

But she was gone.

That night, I couldn't sleep. And for many months... I kept seeing her face. Her pain. Her blood.

I had no peace. Because Emma had none.

It was 21st April. In the evening, I checked the weather... it was going to rain again tonight. I had planned something... something special... a party.

I reached Sneha's house early to set it up. Everything looked beautiful—the decorations, the lights, the mood.

On the table, there were three cups of coffee and a big cake. I had invited Sneha and her husband for the party.

They arrived, smiling. Sneha wore a golden top, and her husband, Iva Louis, wore a black suit. They looked like a newlywed couple on their first night together.

Iva looked around and asked,

"Isn't anyone else coming?"

I smiled. "They will... later. But you two are my special guests."

They waited all evening, but night came, and no one else arrived.

Sneha looked confused. "Why hasn't anyone come to the party?"

I quietly locked all the doors.

Then I said, "It doesn't matter. Let's cut the cake. You both are enough." I handed them coffee.

Suddenly, the lights flickered. Shadows danced across the walls. A cold breeze swept through the room. Sneha shivered.

"What... what's happening?" she whispered.

I didn't answer. Slowly, the air around us grew heavy, suffocating. The sound of footsteps echoed, though no one was there. A faint, mournful voice whispered, "Justice..."

Sneha screamed, terrified. The room felt alive, almost as if the house itself was punishing her. Doors slammed shut on their own. Windows rattled violently. She ran around, panicking, but every exit was blocked. Her reflection in the mirrors twisted into a pale, bloodied face, Emma's face.

And then I smiled, quietly... because this night wasn't about me. It was Emma's justice.

Then, at exactly 3 AM, on the night of 22nd April, something strange began to happen. The room grew icy cold, and the shadows seemed to stretch toward Sneha and her husband.

Objects began to move on their own. Emma's photo on the wall glowed faintly red, and a low, whispering voice echoed through the house:

"Justice... justice for me..."

Sneha and her husband screamed, terrified. Doors slammed shut. Windows rattled. The cake on the table toppled over, and the lights flickered violently. They were trapped, helpless, and fear washed over them like a wave.

I watched quietly as the house itself seemed to punish them. The air was thick, heavy with Emma's anger. Finally, the chaos ceased. When the sun rose, Sneha and her husband were found in the house, pale and terrified, muttering about the night they would never forget.

On the news, people whispered:

"They were found dead... but no one knows what happened. Some say it was fear... some say it was justice... something... or someone, watching over them."

I sat in front of the TV, sipping my coffee, calm and collected. A faint, almost satisfied smile played on my lips. Emma's revenge had come... and it was flawless.

At that moment, I noticed a letter lying on my table, as if someone had quietly left it there. The paper was damp with tears, and just one word was written on it: "Thank you."

Below that, there was a small lipstick kiss mark. It felt as if Emma had left behind a piece of her love and gratitude. In that instant, I realized that the soul that had been suffering for years was finally free. Somewhere, she was smiling... watching me from afar.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Heer, wake up! It's 9 o'clock! You're getting late for college!"

I took a deep breath and smiled to myself.

"Finally... even if it was just a dream, I fought back... and took revenge."

About Nida Heer.

From the serene valleys of Kashmir, Nida Heer is a poet, writer, and artist whose journey began with verses born out of resilience. Writing in Urdu, English, and Kashmiri, her works have been featured in various magazines and anthologies across . Winner of the Nelson Mandela Literacy Competition in poetry, she is also skilled in calligraphy, painting, and voice-over artistry. Currently, she is working on her upcoming novel *Wisal e Khudi*, continuing her mission to weave strength and hope through words.

Who waits to strike me every night?

By Nida Heer

In the deep darkness of night, wrapped in the soft, gentle shade of white curtains and the warm embrace of her bed, Louis Anaya had descended into the valley of dreams. Her face glowed with a dewy shimmer, tired yet radiant with beauty. Strands of silky hair fell across her closed eyes, and she was lost in the quiet, heavy rhythm of sleep, as if peace itself had finally wrapped her in its arms after a long time.

But then... suddenly, a jolt!

It was as if some invisible force had torn through her dreams.

A strange shiver gripped her entire being. A cold wave of fear ran through her veins, like frozen poison slowly seeping into her body. Her chest tightened, and her breaths grew tangled, as if the air itself refused to pass through.

Her hands began to tremble uncontrollably, as if all the strength in her body had dissolved into some unknown void. Moisture gathered at the corners of her eyes, and then, suddenly, silent and unstoppable, tears rolled down her cheeks, as if a storm had erupted on a calm, quiet sea.

There was no terrifying dream, no horrifying thought, yet a strange feeling lingered:

It was as if someone was watching her...

As if someone were waiting for her...

As if someone, hidden in the shadows, was ready to strike.

A sharp pain shot through her head, and her heart began pounding uncontrollably, as if it might burst through her ribs. A strange restlessness spread through her body; her legs trembled, as if the ground beneath her were shaking with some unseen fear.

Suddenly, in a panic, she covered her ears with both hands and screamed with all her might,

And then... everything stopped.

Sleep returned, wrapping her gently once again, as if nothing had happened.

The next morning, the house was filled with joy. Laughter echoed everywhere, as if all the shadows of the night had vanished. Anaya sat at the breakfast table, savouring the warmth of her mother's loving gaze. Her mother fed her little bites with her own hands, while her brother, snuggled under a blanket, slept soundly nearby.

Her mother kept trying to wake him. He would walk to the door, splash a few drops of water on his face, and then return to lie down again.

Anaya laughed. "Amми, leave him be. Don't wake him up."

After breakfast, she sat close to her mother and quietly said, "Amми, I'm going back to sleep."

Her mother smiled, ran her fingers gently through Anaya's hair, and Anaya went to her room. She slept peacefully...

But then, Once again, fear woke her. Her breath caught in her throat. That same terrifying feeling returned, as if someone were approaching... as if someone were lying in wait.

Outside, everything was completely silent. Only the gentle patter of raindrops and the soft rustling of leaves could be heard.

Tears streamed down her face uncontrollably, and before she knew it, sleep had once again wrapped her in its comforting embrace...

At seven in the morning, there came a knock at the door.

“Anaya! You’re late! You have to go to school!”

But Anaya paid no attention. She pulled the blanket over her head and continued sleeping peacefully.

Hours later, her phone kept ringing. Frustrated, she threw it against the wall—but another call came immediately. She pressed the side button to silence it, yet it kept ringing. Her anger flared.

Downstairs, her father and grandmother called out to her, but she didn’t respond.

Then came a loud, booming knock at the door!

She heard her father’s voice, and her heart began to race.

Nervously, she forced herself to get up, washed her face, and stepped outside, only to find that Abba had already gone.

A strange sadness settled over her. She had missed the chance to see Abba before he left for work, gone without a single word exchanged.

Feeling down, Anaya returned to her room and sat by the window. The rain had stopped, and soft sunlight shimmered on the glass panes. A few children were playing in the courtyard...

But who were they?

They were her childhood friends.

Why were they still so small? Why hadn't they grown, just as Anaya had? Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed her mother's voice calling, pulling her attention back:

"Anaya, we can't find your brother's school card. Look for it."

"Okay, I'll see," she replied.

They both sat nearby, and Anaya, laughing, shared stories from college with her mother. Her mother chuckled warmly, enjoying every word.

Then her brother came in.

"I found the card! It was in my bag the whole time!"

Anaya and her mother looked at him, exasperated.

"We turned the whole room upside down! If you had told us earlier, we wouldn't have made such a mess!"

Her brother laughed and tugged at her cheeks.

"Good job, sister, making such a mess... because now there's one more task left."

"What? What task?" she asked.

He grinned. "Those blue-chain jeans I wore at the last function... I need them!"

Anaya rolled her eyes. “Oh, philosopher... find them yourself.”

“Please... I’ll give you chocolate! Just find them!”

She smiled. “Drama king!”

Anaya tore through the room, scattering clothes everywhere. Finally, she found the jeans and laid them on the bed for her brother to wear.

Two days passed. The jeans remained untouched.

But why?

Seeing this, Anaya’s heart sank. Why hadn’t her brother worn the jeans, even though he had been in such a hurry to find them?

Every night... the same knock.

For the past sixteen days, she had been hearing footsteps... a white shadow... slowly approaching.

One night, Anaya ran outside and found her mother standing in the rain. She clung to her, crying,

“Ammi! Someone comes to hurt me every day! They’re going to kill me...”

Her mother held her close, pressing her gently against her chest.

“No, my child. You are very strong. Nothing like that will happen to you,” she whispered softly.

Then Anaya noticed something—her brother’s shoes lying in the corridor. Old, dusty, and untouched.

Her mother quietly said, “He doesn’t wear them... because they don’t fit him.”

For a moment, the thought pulled Anaya's mind away from fear. Her mother added, "Go fetch some water for me. I'll wait right here."

Without hesitation, Anaya ran inside, and there, she saw her childhood friends again, playing with her brother.

But why were they still so small... just as they had been in childhood? Why hadn't they grown, while Anaya herself had grown up?

Why was it like this?

Pulling herself together, Anaya stepped outside to fetch water for her mother, who was waiting in the courtyard.

But when she looked around... her mother was gone.

Panic gripped her. She searched frantically, shouting, calling out, looking everywhere, but there was no answer.

She ran back toward the kitchen, hoping to ask her brother and the childhood friends where her mother had gone, but when she entered... the room was empty.

No friends. No brother.

All gone.

It struck her like a bolt of lightning, the harsh, unrelenting truth. They were all gone.

Her mother... her brother...

She had been living in an imaginary world, a fragile illusion built by her mind. Every knock at the door, every shadow she had

feared... it was all within her own mind, a reflection of her grief and fear.

And yet... she was still alive.

And she had been living in an imaginary world, a world that knocked at her door every night.

It wasn't anyone else. It was her own mind. Her own mental turmoil. Her own pain. The nameless terror dwelling inside her. Her own fear, whispering in the dark. Her own grief, lingering like a shadow. Her own burden, pressing down on her every night.

Yet... she was alive.

Despite every fear, despite every pain, she was alive.

She had lost everything, yet she had learned to smile.

Now... she would not break.

Because at last, she had understood the true meaning of life.

And yes... this is me.

Truly, unapologetically me—

The one who has walked through every darkness.

The one who has stood tall through every storm.

The one who has been shattered, yet never broken.

And this is me, speaking to myself:

“Seeing the enemy brings fear...”

“But if I were truly afraid, would I still be standing here?”

No.

I am not afraid.

I will not break.

Now I know that darkness is only as powerful as we believe it to be.

And until the darkness arrives, the light cannot shine. For after every shadowed night, the glow of dawn inevitably rises.

And the moment to open your eyes, that choice belongs to no one else. It is a choice you make for yourself.

About is already mentioned in previous story of Nida Heer, [Ghost Light In The Monsoon].

The Hostel haunted bed

By Anonymous Narrator

It all began after my roommates had finished their exams and gone home. Their departure left my room completely empty, and for the first time in a long while, I was alone. I had a friend who studied with me, and we had even taken admission together, but his room was separate from mine. When he realized I was alone, he called me and suggested I come over to his room for the night. I appreciated the offer, but I still had some work to finish, so I told him he should sleep while I completed my tasks.

Around two in the morning, while I was busy with my work, I thought I heard my friend's voice calling out softly. At first, I ignored it, thinking it was just my imagination. But then the sound became a little louder, and it seemed real. Curious and slightly nervous, I walked over to my window to check. There was nobody outside. I checked the door, and again, no one was there. Shaking my head, I returned to my work. I told myself that my friend had probably gone back to sleep and that the noises were just my mind playing tricks on me.

After a while, I decided to sleep. I lay down on my bed, hoping to rest for a few hours before the next morning. But my peace did not last long. I heard the same soft voice again, whispering as if someone was right next to me. My heart pounded. Carefully, I got up and approached the door, where I noticed a small hole. I peered

through it, but again, there was nothing. Panic started creeping in. I grabbed my phone and called my friend. At first, he didn't pick up. My fear intensified; I couldn't leave the room, yet I felt utterly alone. Eventually, he answered, and I quietly told him to come to my room, without mentioning what had just happened.

When he arrived, I locked the door behind us. I suggested we sleep in the same room for comfort, but he asked, "Why did you call me here? Was there some work?" I replied that I would explain everything once we were settled. As we entered his room, I was stunned. My friend, along with a few others, had secretly planned this entire thing to scare me. I realized then that the noises I had heard and the sense of someone being present were all part of a prank. I scolded them, feeling both relieved and annoyed at the same time. After the prank, everyone returned to their respective rooms, and my friend, having done his part, went to sleep.

Despite knowing it was a prank, I could not fall asleep easily. My mind kept replaying the incident, trying to process how they had managed to frighten me so thoroughly. That night, I tried hard to sleep, but I was restless. Eventually, I dozed off, only to wake up abruptly from a bad dream. It startled me so much that I immediately got up and went to the washroom. Opening the gate, I noticed the hostel was completely silent. There were no sounds, no movement just the occasional bark of a dog in the distance. When I returned from the washroom, I noticed that the light in my room was on, though I had not switched it on. My heart skipped a beat, and for a moment, I suspected another prank. I called my friend, but he was asleep, and this time, no one else was playing any tricks.

I convinced myself that perhaps I had switched the light on unconsciously. I turned it off and tried to sleep again. The hostel was eerily quiet, and though I felt a slight drowsiness, an uneasy feeling lingered, as if someone was behind me. I checked multiple times, but there was no one there. I recited a few verses and performed a short prayer before finally closing my eyes. Morning arrived, and when my friend woke up, he noticed the light was on. Surprised, he asked me why it had been switched on, but I did not answer, still lost in thought about the night's mysterious occurrences.

That night, we decided to change our routine. My friend slept on his bed, and I took the other bed in the room. I deliberately did not mention the previous night's incident, fearing it might worry him unnecessarily. I tried to sleep, while he quietly did some work. When morning came, I noticed he had woken up early for Fajr prayer. Curious, I asked him why he was up so early, and he laughed, recounting his own experiences from the night. He had felt the same eerie presence that I had the footsteps, the whispering noises, and the sense that someone was right behind him whenever he tried to sleep.

We realized that the strange experiences were likely connected to the bed itself. It turned out that the bed had belonged to a senior student who had since moved away. Apparently, similar incidents had happened with him as well. After performing a short prayer and taking some precautions, he had been able to sleep peacefully in that room, and the occurrences had stopped.

Though we now understood the possible origin of these disturbances, the exact nature of what had been happening remained a mystery. We never felt completely at ease with that bed, and whenever we visited the hostel later, we made sure to sleep elsewhere. The entire episode taught us that fear is not always logical, and that sometimes there are forces in this world beyond our understanding. Not everything frightening needs to have a visible explanation, and experiences like these are mentioned even in spiritual texts, reminding us that the universe is filled with unseen beings and energies.

Reflecting on it now, the hostel incident seems like a blend of practical jokes, unexplained events, and the heightened awareness of being alone late at night. Even though we eventually laughed about the prank, a part of us could not dismiss the subtle eeriness of the night the soft footsteps, the lights flickering, and the persistent feeling of being watched. That memory lingers, making me cautious in similar situations, but also grateful for having shared the experience with a friend I trust.

Though the hostel is no longer part of our daily lives, and we have moved on from those rooms, the lesson remains. Fear can be both real and imagined, yet it teaches vigilance, courage, and the importance of keeping faith and calm. The story also reminds us that sometimes, the supernatural or the unknown might just be a mix of environment, imagination, and a dash of human mischief. But even when the explanation seems rational, the memory of the night, the tension, and the adrenaline remain *vivida* testimony to the inexplicable moments that life occasionally offers.

In the end, we left the hostel without ever fully discovering the cause of the disturbances. We now understand that while human beings dominate this world, there are experiences that hint at the unseen, and whether those are supernatural or psychological, they remain part of our journey. And that is the story of a bed in a hostel room, a night filled with fear, a prank, and the strange interplay of perception and reality a night I will never forget.

The Unusual Sound 2

Story by Rukhsar Naseem

(A True Account as Narrated by the Author's Sister, with Parts Written by Mustakeen Mushtaq)

When my brother, Mustakeen, first told me about "Part One" of what he was experiencing, I didn't believe him. Honestly, I thought, "Yaar, yeh sach nahi ho sakta." Strange sounds, phantom footsteps, voices of children. It all sounded like a horror film script, not real life.

But soon, it became my reality too. The Beginning of the Sounds
It all started when Mustakeen left for Kashmir for his studies, leaving me alone at home. In the beginning, there was only silence. But slowly, silence itself became heavy, and within it came sounds that didn't belong. Sometimes I would hear the crying of a small child. It wasn't the ordinary cry of a baby. It was soaked in pain and abandonment. It felt as if the child had been left alone for years, its voice echoing with despair. Other times, I would hear the faint chapp-chapp of slippers.

The sound of a child walking behind our house. Every single day, it would pass, and every single day I froze, too afraid to open the window and see where it was coming from. Then came the sweeping. At night, I would feel as though my family members were outside, sweeping the yard, talking, laughing. I could hear

their voices so clearly that I almost got up to check. But each time, something inside me whispered, “Maybe it’s just your imagination.” And I would lie back down, though my heart pounded against my chest. Yet the sounds were real to me. They were not dreams. They were not faint illusions. They were clear and tangible, as if someone else was living inside our walls. The Night Everything Changed Months passed in this strange rhythm until one night something happened that scarred me deeply. I was asleep when suddenly my blanket was pulled off. My eyes snapped open and the blanket was gone. Before I could even move, I felt invisible hands lifting me up, carrying me out of my room. When I realized I was outside, the air felt heavier, colder. My body trembled violently, and a strange fever spread through me. Somehow, I managed to call my parents and tell them what had happened. They told me to come and sleep with them. Shaking and crying, I also called my brother. “I still can’t feel my legs properly,” I told him. “I’m terrified. How did this even happen? How did I end up outside my room?” I had witnessed it all with my own eyes. This was no dream. My brother, shocked, said that when he returned home, he would look into it himself.

From that night onward, the story was no longer his alone. It had become mine too. A Family Mystery We never spoke much about it as a family. Our grandmother, who had once heard those strange sounds too, eventually forgot about them. Or maybe she chose to forget. But for me and my brother, the memories stayed. Even now, when we talk about those days, there’s a strange mix of fear and nostalgia. We wonder what it was. Truly something supernatural, or just our minds playing tricks on us?

Perhaps we'll never know. As I grew older, the fear slowly turned into curiosity. Now, when I think back, I don't shudder the way I used to. Instead, there's almost a thrill. Like revisiting a scary story you loved as a child. Beyond the Sounds There is something about strange experiences that binds people together. For us, it became a shared memory, a dark thread woven into our family's fabric. Even though our grandmother has forgotten, and the house itself has changed, the echoes of those nights still live inside me and my brother. Sometimes, late at night, when the world is asleep, I think I still hear it. A faint cry, the sound of slippers, the whisper of sweeping. It no longer frightens me. It just exists. And maybe that's the scariest part. How easily humans can adapt to the inexplicable, how mystery itself can become normal.

Author's Note This story is based on the true experiences of the author's sister. Parts of *The Unusual Sound* were written by Mustakeen Mushtaq to preserve the rawness of these memories. Whether these incidents were supernatural or psychological remains unclear, but their impact on the family was undeniably real.

Part II:
Shadows and Reflections

The Shadow in the Courtyard

By Asma Khurshid

I live in a small village, far away from the noise and lights of the town. I share a simple house surrounded by tall trees and a graveyard. Life here is quiet, but when night falls, the silence feels heavier than the mountains around us. I have always been afraid of the dark. Even the rustling of a curtain or the sudden bark of a stray dog makes my heart beat faster. One winter night, I had a dream or perhaps an experience so strange and frightening that I still remember it clearly. In the dream, I was lying on my bed; all lights were off and the whole house was drowned in darkness. Suddenly, I heard footsteps in the courtyard. At first, I thought it was my father, but then I remembered he was sleeping in his own room. The footsteps grew louder, circling the house. I wanted to call out, but my voice was trapped in my throat. Then came a knock on the wooden door. Slow. Heavy. Each knock echoed like thunder in the stillness of the night. My siblings turned in their sleep; no one woke up. Only I was awake, frozen with fear. I looked outside but found no one there. The courtyard was empty, still and silent, yet there was a sound-like someone was standing there, watching, hiding in the darkness. I looked left and right through the window pane, but no one was visible. My breath trembled as I stepped back. Trying to calm myself, I pulled the blanket tightly

around me and closed my eyes. But as soon as I did, the sound returned.

Earlier, it had come from the direction of the door. Now it came from right outside my window. I froze under the blanket. My heart was racing so fast it felt like it would break. My breaths grew shallow, almost fading away. For a moment, everything fell silent, so still that I thought the terror had ended. I whispered to myself, "Maybe it's nothing... maybe I should sleep." But just as I tried to drift into sleep again, the silence broke. This time, it wasn't footsteps. It was voices—very low, very heavy, as though someone was speaking in whispers. Only it didn't sound like one person. It sounded like many. Dozens of whispers, all at once, right outside my room. My heart pounded so hard I thought it would wake my siblings. I pressed my ears, hoping it was only my imagination, but the voices grew clearer. They were talking slowly. In a language I half-understood, half-feared. The window jolted slightly, though no wind blew. I pulled the blanket over my head, but even there, the whispers followed me. It felt as if they were inside my pillow, inside my ears. I wanted to scream, but my lips stayed sealed, heavy as stone. Suddenly, the whispers stopped. The silence that followed was far more terrifying than the voices. I gathered a little courage and gazed again through the windowpane. But there was no one, not even in the farthest distance. When I looked more carefully, in the faint glow of the moonlight, a shadow stood taller than any man, darker than night itself. It did not move. Its attire was so strange, so shapeless that I couldn't even identify its legs or arms, but I could clearly see its long hair and its back. I had not seen its face. My chest tightened.

The shadow was not walking it was floating slowly, towards the door. I quickly hurried back to my bed. As soon as I tried to comfort myself and take a breath, the knock came again. But this time it was not slow, not heavy. It was furious, like dozens of fists pounding on the wood all at once. I covered my ears, but the sound shook through the walls. I wanted to wake my parents, but no sound came out of my mouth. My body felt locked, paralyzed. I could only lie there, shivering. The knocks suddenly stopped. For a moment, there was peace. But then, to my horror, the voices started again this time from inside the room. Very close. As if someone was standing just behind my bed. I squeezed my eyes shut to avoid seeing; a pin-drop silence followed. When I slowly opened them, I saw the shadow was no longer outside. It had slipped in, without opening the door or the window. It stood tall behind the door. I couldn't breathe. My hands went numb. The whispers filled the room, circling me; voices echoed from all directions. The shadow began moving closer. Not walking. Not floating. But as if it was unfolding out of the darkness itself, growing taller, wider, swallowing the corners of the room. When it reached the foot of my bed, I thought my heart would stop. Its face was not visible at all, but I could feel its stare burning into my chest. The voices merged into one deep, thunderous growl. The shadow leaned closer, closer, until it felt like it would touch me. And then— I woke up. Sweating, breathless, my blanket twisted around me. The corner of the room near the door looked darker, as though something had just hidden there. My siblings slept peacefully. The house was silent. But even now, whenever I close my eyes, I hear those whispers. I wonder if it was only a dream.

Or did something from the graveyard, from the silence of the night, come searching for me? When I woke up in the morning, I couldn't shake off this dream, so I tried to put it into a short poem, hoping to pour out my frustration.

The Shadow Outside”

I looked outside, but no one stood,

Only silence filled the wood.

The night was deep, the wind was cold,

Yet something stirred, unseen, untold.

No footsteps echoed, no faces near,

Only the weight of haunting fear.

A shadow lingered, dark and tall,

I felt its gaze, though none at all.

Dream or truth—I could not say,

But its memory never fades away.

About Asma Khurshid Is Already Mentioned In the previous story of , Echoes in the dark.

The Shadow in the Mirror

By Munazah Nisar Beigh

I still remember the night I saw her. It was a typical Tuesday, and I was getting ready for sleep. As I stood in front of the mirror, brushing my hair, I noticed a figure standing just behind me. At first, I thought it was just my brother, who had been watching TV in the living room. But as I turned around, I realized I was alone.

The room was silent, except for the sound of my own breathing. I turned back to the mirror, and that's when I saw her face. It was a reflection that didn't belong to me. Her eyes were black as coal, and her skin was deathly pale. She was smiling, but it wasn't a friendly smile.

I felt a chill run down my spine as I realized that I was staring at my own reflection, but it wasn't me. The figure didn't move or react. It just stood there, its presence making the air feel thick and heavy. I tried to step back, but my feet felt rooted to the spot. The lights in the room began to flicker, and the mirror started to shake. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I spun around, but there was no one there. The figure was gone, but the memory of its presence lingered.

I didn't sleep that night. I kept thinking about the shadow in the mirror, wondering who or what it was. Was it a ghost, a spirit, or

just my imagination playing tricks on me? I never found out, but I never forgot that night.

Years later, I'm still haunted by the memory of that shadow. Sometimes, I catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of my eye, but when I turn to look, it's gone. I'm left with the feeling that it's still watching me, waiting for its next opportunity to appear.

I've learned to live with the fear, but I'll never forget the shadow in the mirror. It's a part of me now, a part of my story, and I'll carry it with me forever.

About Munazah Nisar Beigh

My journey began with a spark of curiosity and a love for learning. As a student from Srinagar, I have always been driven to excel academically. I am currently pursuing a B.Sc. in Nursing at Government Medical College, Srinagar.

This project has given me the chance to contribute meaningfully and learn from others. I am grateful to be part of this journey and excited to see the final outcome.

The Shadows of Riyadh

Story by: Suhaib Pz

I was born and raised in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia—a land whispered about for its Jinn's and haunted tales, where some of the scariest stories come alive under the cover of night. I was around 14 or 15 years old when this happened, a kid who was easily scared but fascinated by the darkness. Every night, I would lie on my back, blanket pulled tightly over me, leaving only my eyes exposed so I could watch the shadows dance in my room. The door was always slightly open, letting the kitchen light spill in, casting faint, flickering shapes on the walls. Directly below my bed, slightly to the left, was the door leading to the hallway. Beyond that was the wall where the kitchen light would fall perfectly. If anyone moved in the kitchen, their shadow would appear there. But that night, around 3:30 or 4 a.m., the house was silent. My father was away, and my sister and mother were asleep in the same room as me—no one could have been outside. And then I saw it. A shadow appeared on the wall outside my bedroom door. Perfectly human-shaped. It paused, as if aware I was watching, and lingered for a solid five seconds before vanishing. My heart pounded. Sweat ran down my back. I stayed there, frozen, staring at the wall for what felt like half an hour, unable to move, unable to breathe freely. Finally, the call for Fajr prayer pierced the silence. Summoning every ounce of courage, I got up to perform wudhu.

The living room was dim, illuminated only by the kitchen light spilling across the floor. And then, in the farthest corner of the room, I saw him—my father—sitting distinctly with his legs folded. I thought he must have come home last night. But something was off. I couldn't see his face, and instinct told me something was terribly wrong. My father would never sit on that sofa at this hour. Trying to steady my nerves, I didn't look too long at what appeared to be my father. I sat on the sofa across from him. And then, as he stood up, I saw it clearly: his face was empty. No eyes, no nose, no mouth—just a featureless outline, pale and still. He walked past me, and a low, guttural growl rumbled from him, a sound unlike anything I had ever heard, chilling me to the core. Normally, when my father saw me awake, he would ask, "What are you doing at this hour?" But now— silence. Just the growl, deep and resonant, vibrating in the air around me. He went to the sink, performing wudhu, with the sound of splashing water and the motions of the ritual. When I glanced back after ten seconds, he had vanished. But drops of water were clearly visible on the sink, as if it had been used just moments ago. My blood ran cold. A hand touched my shoulder. And then, in a chilling, raspy voice, my name was whispered:

"Suhaib."

I screamed, but it wasn't a normal scream. It was a scream from the inside—a raw, voiceless terror clawing out of my chest. I bolted toward my father's room, only to find it empty, silent, with no one there. My heart raced. I quickly closed the door, ran back to our room, and clung to my mother, telling her everything in a trembling voice. Even now, the memory lingers. Riyadh, a city of

light and modernity, hides shadows that are never empty... and presences that were never meant to be confronted.

About Suhaib Pz

Suhaib Pz was born and raised in Saudi Arabia and later spent time in Türkiye, experiencing the meeting point of Middle Eastern and European cultures. His travels across these regions gave him a deep appreciation for how stories, people, and traditions intertwine. His time at Istanbul University enriched his literary perspective. Now based in Kashmir, Suhaib is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Statistics and continues to explore his passion for writing, weaving together cross-cultural experiences with the universality of human connection.

The Girl in White

By Asma Khurshid

One autumn evening, cool and still,
I sat beneath the apple hill.
My parents worked with baskets near,
While I enjoyed the sky so clear.
The wind was soft, the night was cold,
The orchard whispered tales untold.
I rested quietly, lost in air,
When suddenly, I sensed a stare,
Like footsteps moving on the ground.
I turned my head, and in a blink,
A girl appeared, so pale, distinct.
She wore a dress of shining white,
Her eyes were shadows in the light.
She sang a song of mournful cries,
A broken tune, as someone dies.
Before I saw her face complete,
She vanished quick, so fast, so fleet.
I rose in fear, I longed to go,
But something trailed, step slow by slow.
Whenever I turned back to see,
The steps would halt behind the tree.
And when I faced the path again,
The sound returned, like hidden pain.
Then terror grew, my heartbeat fast,
As copies of that girl were cast.
Behind each tree the face would glow,

A smile, then vanish, row by row.
I closed my eyes to test my dream,
But heard her song, a haunting scream.
I opened them wide; she was not there,
Only birds were in the air.
I told myself, "Imagination,
Affecting thought, hallucination.
" Yet minutes passed, her voice returned;

A whisper cold, my spirit burned:
"I'm here, not yet gone;
You see me, you hear me on.
" I tried to call, to scream, to cry,
But breath was stolen from my sigh.
My voice was locked, my chest held tight,
My soul was sinking into night.
And then as suddenly as she came,

She left me there, no trace to name.
No shadow lingered on the ground,
No echo of her mournful sound.
I longed to tell my parents near,
But feared they'd laugh, dismiss my fear.
So in my diary I wrote the tale,
Of autumn air, of ghostly wail.
And still today, when orchards call,
I feel her eyes behind it all.
The girl in white has never fled,
She walks among the trees of red

About already mentioned in previous stories.

The Hall of Whispering Women

By Mustakeen Mushtaq [Author]

After weeks of drowning in assignments, deadlines, and sleepless hostel nights, I finally escaped college for a short break. The thought of going home filled me with relief. All through the journey, only one thing played in my mind: maa ka khana. After so long, I was about to taste food cooked with love instead of the bland hostel meals that had drained my appetite. The excitement bubbled inside me—I even imagined my family waiting eagerly at the door to surprise me with hugs and smiles. But destiny had other plans. When I finally reached home, I climbed the stairs with the pride of a king returning to his palace. Yet strangely, the gate was silent. No one was waiting. No happy faces. No surprise. A flicker of disappointment rose inside me, but I consoled myself, “It’s okay. I’ll be the one to surprise them this time.” As I stepped in, I saw my mother in the kitchen, busy preparing food. My uncle sat calmly in the lobby, and my sister was inside her room. Everything seemed ordinary—except for one bizarre detail. They were all wearing black earphones. Not wearing them idly, but completely lost in them. Their eyes seemed vacant, as if they weren’t even aware of my arrival. A chill brushed my spine. I called out, “Di... why is the house so noisy? What’s that sound upstairs?” She came out slowly, removing one earphone. Her face looked pale, but she spoke casually: “There’s an aunty in your old hall

upstairs.” Her words froze me. That hall had always been mine. It had been left empty after I shifted to Kashmir. Nobody in my family ever entered it because of certain strange things that were never discussed openly. “What is she doing there?” I snapped, my voice rising. “Why would you even let someone stay in that room?” Before she could answer, her little daughter suddenly ran upstairs. My sister panicked, shouting, “No! Come back!” Her voice cracked with fear. She grabbed my arm and pleaded, “Don’t go upstairs... please, you don’t know what’s there.” But her words only fuelled my anger. I couldn’t ignore this. I rushed up the staircase. And there she was—the aunty. She stood in the corner of the hall, her long black hair hanging loosely, covering half her face. Her clothes were dull, her presence suffocating. My niece played nearby, careless and unbothered. My heart pounded, but I forced myself to stay calm. I picked up my niece quickly and started to walk downstairs.

Then— “Mustakeen...” Her voice crawled into my ears like ice water. I froze mid-step. Slowly, I turned. She was staring directly at me now, her eyes dark and heavy, her lips twisting into a strange half-smile. In her hand was a small object—something I couldn’t recognize in the dim light. “Give this to her downstairs,” she said, her tone almost commanding. Against my will, I held out my hand. She dropped it into my palm. Cold. Heavy. Wrong. I walked down and gave it to my sister. Her face turned pale instantly. She shook her head and whispered, “You can’t hand this to me. Whatever she gives must be returned only by the one who receives it.” Her words stung like a warning bell. My chest tightened. What had I accepted? Anger replaced my fear. Without listening, I snatched

the object back and stormed upstairs, determined to return it and end this madness. My sister's cries echoed behind me: "Don't go! You don't understand!" But I didn't stop. When I entered the hall again, the aunty was gone. Instead, a strange sound poured from the storeroom next to the hall—low, rhythmic chanting. Curiosity mixed with terror. I pushed the half-open door. What I saw made my blood freeze. Inside the dimly lit room, fifteen to twenty women sat in a perfect circle. Their long hair hung loose; their heads swayed as they chanted in unison. The air reeked of incense and something rotten. The rhythm of their voices grew louder and deeper, shaking the walls around me. I couldn't breathe. Then, all at once, they stopped. In eerie silence, every head turned toward me. Red eyes. All of them. Staring straight into my soul. I stumbled back, my body paralyzed with terror. My ears rang with their voices growing again—louder this time, words I couldn't understand but which clawed at my mind. Suddenly, my sister's voice pierced through the chaos: "Wake up! Wake up!" And then—cold water splashed across my face. I gasped and sat up. My friend stood there, shaking me. "You had to leave for home today, so I woke you," he said, confused. I sat there shivering, drenched, my heart still pounding. The chanting echoed faintly in my head.

Was it really a dream? Or had I glimpsed a part of reality that none of us are meant to see? Even today, I don't have the answer.

The Weight on the Second Floor

By Peermzada Naveed

In the summer of 2023, Tuaha stayed in his second-floor room in Kupwara — his own space, but at night, and sometimes even during daytime naps, a strange heaviness would press on his chest. Sometimes his arms were pinned down; other times it was just a weight that made it hard to breathe. One night, he opened his eyes and saw it clearly: a small, dark creature with black hair. Its eyes were deep and unblinking, staring straight into him. He felt certain it was an evil spirit. Every night it came — sometimes moving closer, sometimes just watching in silence. Sleep became terrifying, whether in the dark or in daylight. Later, while in Srinagar for his Class Twelve studies, the same thing followed him. Nights were no longer safe anywhere. After exams, he went to Pahalgam with his cousins and friends. One afternoon, while his cousin went to buy roti, he tagged along. He wore only shorts and a half inner, feeling strangely exposed. The driver cautioned him, “It’s not a good area.” The locals said nothing, but the air felt heavy, as if something unseen trailed behind them. Shadows shifted unnaturally, and he felt eyes fixed on him. That night and even in short naps the following day the same crushing pressure returned. His heart raced, and he couldn’t shake the sense of being watched. The next day, he had an accident and was admitted to hospital. His cousins and friends stayed by his side, and his father

arrived quickly. Yet even in the hospital, sleep offered no safety. Sometimes he woke to the same suffocating weight on his chest, with a dark shadow lingering in the corner of the room. Disturbed, he confided everything to the imam at the masjid. The imam said it was an evil enchantment and advised him to seek the guidance of a trusted peer Sahab. Through the peer's prayers and by the will of God, Tuaha slowly began to feel safer. He realized that even though darkness tried to frighten him, God had placed the peer Sahab in his life as an anchor for his healing. Faith became his anchor, and he learned that divine mercy can transform fear into safety — even when nights feel alive and shadows seem to watch every move.

About Peerzada Naveed

My name is Peerzada Naveed Ahmad, and I am currently studying at Amar Singh College, Srinagar. I am pursuing a B.A. (Hons) in History with Economics as a minor. Through my academic journey, I aim to deepen my understanding of the past and its impact on the present, while exploring ideas that inspire thoughtful reflection and learning

The House of Illusions

By Anika Fatima Khan

I slept deeply and woke in a house I had never seen before.

Its walls were white, broken, and bleeding with cracks, as if the place itself were rotting. Strange machines hummed in every corner—computers glowing with a single word: VIRUS. From their speakers came distorted sounds, like wires being cut, like screams pressed into static.

I stood in a line of teenagers. I did not know why we were there or what waited for us. The line led to a pale woman, her lips painted with a dark, grotesque smile. Her eyes were endless pits. When my turn came, she whispered:

“Draw an animal or a bird anywhere on your body.”

Behind me, voices murmured: “Wherever you draw it, you will lose that part of yourself. It will be taken. Disabled.”

I tried to reach out through one of the computers to call my people, but the screens screamed back at me—VIRUS—until I was caught. The woman’s voice grew harsher: “Draw an animal, or they will come.”

Who were they?

I ran.

Through endless corridors I fled, and suddenly, I was not alone. My family, my closest friends, my dearest ones—all were running beside me.

Relief filled me for a moment, until I looked back.

Fire. A wall of fire was chasing us.

My people surged forward, faster than me, not even looking back once. The fire consumed them, melting their flesh into earth. The ground cracked open, revealing skulls in the soil, grinning in silence.

I alone remained, alive but hollow. Terrified, I stumbled into the only place I thought was safe—my grandmother's old house, where I had spent eighteen years of my life. But safety was an illusion.

Gunshots cracked the silence. I looked through the window. My neighbour stood in the garden, clutching an AK-47. His eyes bulged grotesquely, nearly spilling from his skull, like a corpse puppeteer awake. He said nothing, but he knew I was there. Bullet after bullet tore into the walls, corners, shadows—anywhere I might be hiding. He wanted me gone.

I crawled like a snake, escaping through the cracks of the house into his own. But there, his family waited. They smiled with sharpened teeth, their voices fusing into one eerie chorus:

“We see you.”

Before they could touch me, the world shifted.

I was in a car, my mother driving. The streets stretched forever, but every road was suffocated with cars—all of them white, all of them still. No path was open. She tried to park, but every space was claimed. Finally, she stopped near a tall, iron gate.

A blue sports car tried to take the same space, but we forced our way in. The gates creaked open. Inside the mansion's garden, a crowd stood with their backs to us, hands raised in unison. Their black robes rippled like liquid shadows. They chanted in a language that didn't belong to this world.

Two of them broke away and approached me. Their faces were hidden, but their voices cut deep:

"Come inside."

I turned. My mother was gone.

The ground cracked open. Snakes slithered out of the soil, hissing, weaving around my feet. And there she was again —the pale woman, her lipstick dark as dried blood. She smiled the same wicked smile as before, whispering without words:

"You can run forever, but you will always end up here."

And I realized this was not my world. Not my people. Not my family. This was hers—an upside-down reflection where everything familiar was twisted, wrong, and evil.

Her world.

And I was already inside it.

About Anika Fatima Khan

Anika Fatima Khan is a writer and artist from Budgam who believes every story is a piece of art waiting to be crafted. Currently pursuing her B.A. (Hons), her work spans the lyrical rhythm of poetry and the vivid strokes of her canvas. She is a published co-author of the anthology *Vibrant Verses – The Resonance of Emotion’s Ink*, where her writing explores human emotions and cultural heritage. Anika’s narratives aim to reflect the world’s beauty, complexity, and soul.

Through My Hollow Eyes: Between the Self and the Silence.

Story by Sumeera Nabi

The day had been ordinary chores finished, the house quiet yet an uneasy feeling followed me, as if the air itself were holding its breath. My father and I went to our room at the back of the house. Its window opened by day and shut at night; beneath it, the walnut tree leaned, its branches stretching like dark fingers. By sunlight it offered cool shade, but at night it exhaled something older, heavier fear. I fell asleep with my father beside me, the rhythm of his breathing a fragile comfort. An hour later, I woke with a prickling sensation crawling over my skin. Faint silver light spilled across the floor, and at the foot of my bed a child wandered no more than three or four moving with a calm, deliberate certainty, as if the house were his alone. He did not look at me. He did not need to.

Terror froze me. I screamed. My father stirred. I begged him to turn on the light. When the bulb glowed, the child was gone. The room seemed ordinary, unchanged, yet the weight of impossibility lingered. My father held me, whispering prayers, his certainty stronger than my fear. Weeks later, the hauntings grew bolder. I slept at my cousin's house one night, a brief escape from the oppressive familiarity of home. We had stayed up late, laughing and gossiping, until sleep finally claimed us. But at midnight, a

sudden thirst pulled me from slumber. In the lobby, I froze. My cousin sat there, twisting her fingers. She had been asleep beside me. I screamed, but the house swallowed the sound. No one moved. It was as if I were the only living thing.

Then the kitchen door creaked open. A crowd of pale figures stood inside, faces blank, hands pointing toward one spot. I followed their gesture and saw myself. Another me, standing in the centre, breathing shallow and terrified. For a dizzying moment, I could not tell who was real, if that other me was real, then where I was? Hands seized me, too many to fight. They dragged me down a corridor that didn't exist in the house, a nightmare of sterile walls and humming fluorescent lights. I was strapped into a chair, the air smelling of chemicals and something colder. The old presence appeared — the same figure that haunted my nights, now a withered woman in white. She began to wrap me in cloth, folding me as if I were already dead. Around us, the crowd chanted in flat, unfeeling voices:

“She was evil. She was evil.”

Panic lent me strength. I tore free, running until walls and light dissolved into night. I emerged beneath the walnut tree — the same place where it all had begun. The air was thick, the silence heavy as water. I could still feel the phantom touch of hands on my arms, the echo of their words inside me. Behind me, the house stood quiet and ordinary. Ahead, the tree leaned closer, branches whispering. In the corner of my eye, this women's pale face appeared again, faintly smiling, waiting to catch me again. And then I realized — it was no longer me moving. My voice spoke

words I didn't choose. My eyes saw what I hadn't meant to see. Somewhere deep inside, I was only a shadow, watching from behind the skin that was no longer entirely mine. Sleep no longer feels like rest. It is a door. Every time I close my eyes, I feel her waiting there, breathing in me, moving through me, and I know I will never wake alone again.

About already mentioned in previous stories.

Veil of the Silent Crescent

Story by: Sumeera Nabi

When dreams and reality collide Among countless stories, one belongs to me. It happened in the depths of winter, when the cold was so biting that people wrapped themselves in thick fur blankets, huddling inside their homes. At that time, I used to go to tuition classes. One evening, I returned home late, around eight o'clock. Exhausted, I poured myself a cup of tea, rested briefly, and then made my way toward my room, hoping to study while savouring the warmth of the tea.

As I walked from the kitchen to my room, a soft, almost whispering voice called out to me. I turned around—but the hallway was empty. I told myself it must be my imagination and continued walking. Moments later, I heard it again—this time, a low, deep voice. I spun around, heart pounding, but still, nothing. Perhaps my brother was playing a prank. I glanced around, checking the kitchen, the living room, even my room—but no one was there. Suddenly, voices came from my room. Hesitant but curious, I stepped inside, only to find my family talking normally. I asked my brother if he had called me; he said he hadn't. I sighed, thinking exhaustion had played tricks on my mind, and ignored the fear. I finished my tea, felt a headache coming on, and lay down on the bed. But then I woke abruptly. Outside, through the window, I saw the car parked under the streetlight—it was 11:45

pm. Why hadn't my family woken me to eat? Anger and confusion swept through me, and I got up, heading toward the kitchen. But as I walked through the silent house, I found it empty—completely empty. Sitting on the stairs, a lump in my throat, I began to cry.

From above, a man appeared on the stairs. His voice echoed: "Are you looking for me?" I turned to look at him—and my body froze. A shiver ran through me as terror clawed at my chest. I screamed, and in that instant, I woke up—it had all been a dream. Shaking, I gathered myself and went to eat. Returning to my room afterward, I was about to go back to bed when I heard a scratching at the window. Heart racing, I pulled aside the curtain, but nothing was there. A few minutes later, it came again—louder, more insistent—but still, no one. I wrapped myself in my blanket, trying to find comfort. Minutes later, I felt the door slowly opening. My heart nearly stopped. I pulled back the blanket—the door was open, but no one was there. Trembling, I closed it and lay down, trying to steady my racing heart. Then, suddenly, someone yanked my blanket. My body shook violently, tears streaming down my face. I squeezed my eyes shut, praying not to see whatever it was. When I finally opened them, the room was empty—but my blanket lay crumpled beneath the bed. As urge of fear hit me—I had to get out. Dragging my numb body toward the door, I found it locked. The door that was always unlocked now refused to budge, as if it had turned into solid stone. I shouted for my family, but no one came. The scratching at the window returned. With shaking hands, I approached, pulled aside the curtain, and opened the window fully. A faint streetlight revealed a figure outside. A woman, standing beneath my window, staring directly at me.

Night had enveloped the street; everyone else was asleep. I felt hypnotized by her gaze. The next thing I remember, my family was lifting me, carrying me into the lobby. I woke the next morning in my brother's room. My eyes were bloodshot, my shoulders heavy as if I carried centuries of weight. Days later, I asked my family what had happened. At first, they denied it, then admitted: "We heard your voice around midnight and, scared, came to check on you. The door was tightly shut, so we opened it. We saw you in the dark room, staring out the window. We called you, asked what you were doing, but you didn't answer us, instead you were looking down from the window and speaking to someone below, saying, 'Come inside... why aren't you coming inside... come inside...' we looked but there was no one there. Suddenly, your voice changed—you screamed, and then you fainted. We carried you out."

That night left an indelible mark on my mind.

Even now, I cannot tell whether it was a dream—or reality. And sometimes, late at night, when the house is silent and I am alone in my room, I feel a cold gaze on me. I hear the faintest whisper—soft, deliberate, and terrifyingly close. I open my eyes—and there she is. Standing in the corner, watching, silently and smiling.'

And then I remember...

She had never left the room with me.

Part III:
Dreams and Reality

The Valley That Dreams Itself

Story by: Salika Wani

I dreamed I was walking across Dal Lake at night. The water had frozen into glass, clear as a mirror, and beneath it I could see faces—hundreds of them—staring upward with their mouths open as though calling, though no sound came.

Far away, a Chinar tree stood in the middle of the lake, its black leaves whispering names as they fell. Each name stung, familiar yet lost. When I touched the trunk, it split open like a wound, and a staircase of roots spiralled downward inside.

I followed it, each step sinking into silence, until I emerged in a meadow buried under snow. But the snow was not snow. It was paper—letters, diaries, unfinished poems—falling from the sky like ash. Every flake melted against my skin, leaving stains of ink that spelled fragments of sentences I couldn't finish.

The meadow stretched toward the mountains, and in its centre stood a shrine, glowing faintly. I walked inside. No one was there. Lamps flickered on their own, and the walls were covered in eyes. Not human eyes—eyes of sheep, birds, cows, all creatures of the valley. They blinked and wept, flooding the shrine with saltwater. The tears rose to my chest, then to my throat, until I stumbled outside gasping.

I found myself by the Jhelum. Only it wasn't water flowing—it was faced. Thousands of them, drifting in the current, eyes wide, mouths moving without sound. The river bent into a whirlpool, and all the faces fused into one enormous mask. Its mouth opened, and at last a sound came: a wail so deep it shook the mountains. The ground cracked. The valley trembled.

I tried to run, but the snow turned soft beneath my feet, swallowing me up. When I looked down, I saw the snow wasn't snow at all. It was skin. The ground was alive, breathing, pulling me in. I clawed my way up, and when I broke the surface again, I was in an orchard. The trees bent inward as if listening.

Their branches bore no fruit— only severed hands hanging like apples, fingers twitching in the wind. One hand dropped into my palm, clutching something tightly. I pried it open. Inside was a mirror. But the reflection wasn't me. It was the valley itself, staring back—its rivers like veins, its peaks like ribs. And it whispered in my own voice:

“You are not dreaming Kashmir. Kashmir is dreaming you.”

The mirror shattered. Darkness poured out, swallowing everything—the orchard, the river, the shrine, the Chinar, the faces under the lake. The last sound I heard was the valley breathing, slow and heavy, as if it were alive and waiting for me to wake inside it forever.

About Salika wani

Salika Wani is a first-year student at Government College for Women, Nawakadal, and an aspiring writer. She believes that stories do not belong to writers—they belong to the shadows that whisper them at night. She writes only what refuses to leave her alone, capturing fleeting thoughts, hidden emotions, and lingering memories. Her work invites readers into worlds that are haunting, reflective, and unforgettable

An Insomniac Dream

By Ummat-un-Nisa

Character Introduction:

Rover was a brilliant student and a teacher in both academics and in life. However, during her neutral period, which was actually her peak, something crazy happened.

The Cold Between the Heartbeats

One night at 2:13 a.m., something happened. After an unseen dream, she was moved by some unseen energy to another room. She could even pass through the wall, but she was afraid to do so, as it would reveal the unusual. So, she decided to close her eyes and go to sleep in her room.

But as soon as she closed her eyes, she could see everything she never dared to see. She began to sweat, thinking she was going to die. She was sitting mid-air, aloft as if gravity had forgotten her. Her knees bent slowly in a silent plea, but the air offered no reprieve.

She knew, as the moment passed untouched, that it was only a dream.

She blinked, but the dream didn't fade.

The Gray Fog

She was moving in vain and would never care about pain. She thought it was her turning point of no return. She uttered under her breath to herself, words which were well discernible, but her

inner voice could not feel her. She was afraid of her own self; rules were trying to defend it, yet uncover her.

The Academic Incident

It started very gradually, moving in the right direction—a particular direction. Every day she murmured, "Ah! My life is so perfect: no stress, no health issues, and very nice and academic."

She thought so because she had spent almost 15 years of her life in stress, but relaxing after the stress would bring tears of joy to her. Gradually, she started becoming someone she never thought she would be. She forgot her former self, and one night, everything changed. She received a blow she wasn't expecting.

The dream was revealing the truth about the character's guilt and trauma.

Nothing else worked for her; running, fading, or crawling to the deepest parts of herself—she could only see the scars of what she had wrought.

Suddenly, but slowly, she opened the "Holy Book", and was deeply moved by this verse "Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease".

About Umat Un Nisa

Umat Un Nisa has been passionate about writing since Class 6th. She explores the unseen through her stories and poems, believing that true happiness can be found by expressing oneself on paper. Her writings reflect depth, imagination, and a quiet search for meaning.

The Unanswered Dream

Story by: Meenakshi Sharma

Some dreams come once and vanish like smoke, but others linger—returning night after night, shifting shapes yet carrying the same weight. A vision that refuses to fade. A story I feel compelled to share again and again. It always begins the same way: I find myself running towards a school or college. The road feels endless, yet I know I am late. When I finally arrive, the school gate is closed. I shake it, push it, but it will not move. I plead with the gatekeeper to open it, but he only asks why I am so late. Behind the gate, I hear voices, the sound of classes beginning, but I remain outside, helpless. Panic grips me. Why does this happen to me alone?

Then the scene shifts. I am no longer outside the gate, but inside an exam hall. The question paper lies before me. I try to write the answers, but they slip away from my mind. Other students write steadily, filling their sheets, but when I attempt to write, my memory goes blank. My answer sheet remains empty. The panic grows heavier as I struggle in vain to respond. The dream always ends the same way, and I know it will return again, always waiting for me at the locked gate. But dreams, even the darkest ones, are not only warnings; they are also guides. Perhaps the locked gate is not a final refusal but a challenge—a reminder that not all paths open easily, and that sometimes we must find another way in. The

exam hall becomes a reflection of being tested, of needing recognition, of learning to sit in uncertainty and accept that my answers matter. And perhaps a blank sheet is not only emptiness, but possibility.

For a blank page, after all, is not an end. It is a beginning and a space waiting to be filled. This anthology is my way of writing on that blank sheet. It is my attempt to pass through the locked gate, to sit at the desk, and to answer in the only way I can— through stories, reflections, fragments of dreams. Each piece within these pages is drawn from recurring visions, reshaped into something that can be shared and understood. The dream returns because it demands attention. And perhaps it will keep returning until I give it form—until I learn its lessons, until I give it the answers it seeks.

About Meenakshi Sharma

Meenakshi Sharma (MSc. Med.) currently working in the education department dedicated to nurturing young minds and guiding them towards their future.

My love for writing began back in my school days when I started documenting my thoughts and daily experiences into a diary. What started as simple journaling soon grew into a passion for poetry and other forms of writings. Over the years writing has remained a constant companion allowing me to express my thoughts, dreams and reflections alongside my professional and personal responsibilities.

In Tahajjud Time

Story by Sabiq Sajad

My name is Sabiq. I am 21 years old. For the first time in my life, I felt a spiritual energy just a few days ago. Around 2–3 AM, I made a pledge to myself that I would offer the Tahajjud prayer regularly. At first, nothing unusual happened.

But after some days, when I entered my room after midnight to sleep, I began hearing sounds coming from outside my house—strange noises that I couldn't explain. I stayed alert but chose to ignore them. As it started happening more often, fear slowly crept in.

For months, I struggled to sleep properly. Those nights dragged on endlessly, and I couldn't bring myself to share this with anyone. Then, one night around 2 AM, when I woke up for Tahajjud prayer, I looked outside. What I saw froze me in place: a tall figure with enormous feet, dressed in white, towering nearly ten feet high.

About Sabiq Sajjad

Sabiq is currently pursuing his B.A. at Kishtwar College. From an early age, he has shown a curiosity for learning and a keen interest in exploring new ideas. Alongside his academic pursuits, Sabiq has developed a deep love for writing. His passion for writing allows him to share his unique perspective with others, making him a valuable contributor to this anthology.

Frozen in the Twilight: My Harrowing Sleep Paralysis Night

By Farwa Ishtiaq

The night had wrapped the world outside my window in a dense, impenetrable darkness, the kind that swallowed sound and light whole. I lay in bed, cocooned under the thin blanket, my breathing slow and even. The soft hum of the fan above was the only companion to the stillness around me. Everything seemed normal, until it wasn't. It started with a faint prickling sensation, like tiny, invisible needles dotting the surface of my skin, crawling slowly from my chest out to my limbs. I wanted to shift, to rub my arm, to adjust my pillow, but when I tried, an uncanny realization dawned: my body refused to obey. My arms, my legs, my entire torso were locked in an invisible vice. I could feel the weight of my own limbs, but moving them was impossible. I blinked rapidly, hoping to shake off the sensation, but the world remained stubbornly unchanged. My eyes were wide open, taking in the dim shapes around my room, the familiar outlines of my desk lamp, the bookshelf, the window curtains billowing lightly in the breeze. Yet a paralyzing silence had descended, unnatural and heavy. "It's just sleep," I thought to myself, desperately trying to swallow the rising tide of panic. But the silence mocked me, deeper than the night's sounds had ever been before. I wanted to call out, to scream for help, but as I parted my lips, no sound emerged. My

mouth moved like a broken marionette, producing nothing but a faint, breathless whisper caught inside me. The iron grip tightening over my lungs grew heavier. The slow, deliberate gasps for air felt futile. I was trapped inside my own body, a prisoner in a still guise, fully awake but utterly immobilized.

And then came the shadows.

At first, I wasn't sure if what I was seeing was real or conjured by my terrified mind. The corner of my bedroom, usually an innocuous, dim nook, was warping. The shadows lengthened and thickened until I could barely distinguish the shapes of my desk and chair. From that darkness, pale forms began to emerge, ghostly silhouettes that hovered just beyond the edge of my vision. They were translucent, flickering like faulty holograms, their edges blurred and trembling. Hollow eye sockets stared at me, empty and merciless. These figures didn't have faces in the conventional sense; instead, they bore features that shifted constantly, as if their identities were melting away like wax. Some looked skeletal, with grim, twisted grins stretched across their skull-like faces. Others were swathed in tattered garments that fluttered without any breeze, their outlines roiling in an unseen, malevolent wind. The atmosphere they carried was thick with dread, cold enough to seep into my bones despite the summer heat. They hovered closer, circling my bed like vultures around carrion, their silence a relentless chorus louder than any scream could be. I felt their presence pressing down on my chest, constricting my heartbeat until my ribcage ached with the effort of mere survival. I tried to will myself awake, to fight back, but every muscle refused to respond. My eyelids fluttered, but closing

them only deepened the darkness and invited the ghostly procession closer, while opening them trapped me in this half-real, half-dream horror. As they drew nearer, I could almost feel the whispers, words unspoken but trapped in the space between reality and nightmare. They clawed at my mind, igniting a primal terror: the kind that speaks of ancient, forgotten horrors and helplessness beyond words. Panic pounded through my chest, each heartbeat a frantic drum trying to shatter the invisible chains that bound me. I screamed inside, a silent scream that echoed only in my own mind. The world tilted, the figures multiplying and pressing in, until the suffocating blackness threatened to consume the very edge of my sanity. Time lost all meaning. Seconds stretched into eternities. The night had become a grotesque stage, and I, the unwilling actor trapped in a nightmare tableau, was caught between the waking world and the dark labyrinth of dreams. And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the ghosts dissolved, the shadows receded, and the iron grip on my body shattered like brittle glass. I jolted upright, gasping as though resurrected from the depths of a drowning ocean. My limbs, once frozen, pumped with a fierce vitality, responding eagerly to my frantic commands. The familiar ceiling above greeted me like an old friend, plain and unthreatening. My chest pounded like a war drum, sweat slicking my skin, the taste of fear sharp and bitter on my tongue. I blinked again and again, forcing myself to believe I was awake, that none of it had been real. Gradually, the oppressive silence lifted, replaced by the gentle hum of the fan and the steady, reassuring rhythm of my own breathing. Trembling, I reached for the light switch and flooded the room with brightness.

The shadows I had feared could not survive the harsh truth of daylight. My mind struggled to leave the nightmare behind, but its echoes lingered stubbornly, a grim reminder of how close I had come to losing myself that night. In the cold aftermath, I collapsed back onto the bed, every muscle screaming from the battle I had barely survived. Relief fought with a creeping dread that clung to my chest like a shadow. Sleep would not come easily, if it came at all. And beneath it all, an unrelenting question gnawed at the edges of my mind: what unspeakable horrors had truly been watching me, lurking in the fragile, haunted space between sleep and wakefulness, cannot describe the terror. And in that very moment, I suddenly woke up.

The Vanishing Night

By Mustakeen Mushtaq [Author]

It was supposed to be an ordinary evening. A few relatives had come over for dinner; the house hummed with laughter, clinking plates, and talk of wedding preparations. In a few months there would be a marriage in the family, so every gathering felt half celebration, half planning. That night my brother-in-law (jiju) stayed late. After dinner my father suggested he spend the night, but his car had gone for repairs and he insisted on going home. It was too late to let him walk alone, so my uncle offered to drop him. I went along, happy for the midnight ride. I didn't know the road we would take that night would haunt me forever. The air outside was still and heavy. As we drove toward the main road, I noticed something strange. My grandparents, who usually went to bed early, were standing near the corridor, their eyes fixed on the field beyond the house. My grandfather motioned me closer and whispered, "Look... do you see it?" I followed his gaze. From the open field a blinding light was rising, pulsing like a heartbeat. At the same time, screams echoed from that direction—piercing, unnatural cries that didn't sound entirely human. My body stiffened with fear. Before I could react, the car horn blared. My uncle called urgently. I ran, jumped in, and we left quickly, forcing my mind to forget what I had seen. We dropped jiju home safely, distracting ourselves with songs on the car stereo. But fate wasn't

done with us. On the way back we passed through Char Chinar, one of the oldest spots near the river with massive trees and a small stream.

The night was quiet until, suddenly, the car engine died. The lights went out. Darkness swallowed us. I sat frozen while my uncle tried to restart the engine. My heart hammered when, beneath one of the huge Chinar trees, I saw it — a shadow. Someone—or something—was sitting there. Still. Watching us. My breath caught. I pointed it out, but my uncle, forcing calm, told me not to imagine things. Still, I knew what I had seen. The figure was there, unmoving, radiating an eerie presence. Finally, with a shudder, the car roared back to life. My uncle pressed hard on the accelerator and we sped away without looking back. Enwreathed homestay firmly, “Don’t mention this to anyone. Forget it ever happened.” I nodded, though my mind refused to let it go. The next morning, while helping my mother hang the washed clothes outside, my eyes fell on the same patch of ground where I had seen the strange light the night before. My stomach churned. I went to my grandparents, desperate for answers. “Dadi... Dadu...you were there last night, weren’t you? I saw you. Please — tell me the truth. Say yes, just once.” They looked at me blankly, confused. My grandmother frowned. “What are you saying? We were asleep. We never went outside.” I felt the blood drain from my face. My voice cracked as I begged them to admit it, but they denied it again and again. If they hadn’t been there... then who had I seen? Were those really my grandparents, or something wearing their faces? And the shadow under the Chinar — was it connected to the blinding light in the field? Even today I cannot answer what

happened that night. All I know is that part of me still believes my family disappeared that evening, and what returned with me may not have been them at all.

The Magical Forest

By Nida Heer

It was springtime, and we were playing in a garden. While playing, we wandered quite far and came across a large palace-like house. It looked very old, clearly not from the present time, yet it was strikingly beautiful, as if a great deal of money had been spent on its construction.

The house had a vast garden filled with towering Chinar trees, their leaves scattered gracefully across the ground. The ground floor of the house was completely open, resembling a large hall. On one side, there was a staircase that led to the second floor. The second floor had corridors stretching to the left and right, with rooms built in neat rows along both sides. Above this was the third floor, designed in the same way, and then the fourth floor, where a slab had been constructed and even used for gardening.

The air was alive with the sounds of birds, the cheerful chirping of sparrows, the cawing of crows, the chattering of parrots and the melodious call of the cuckoo echoing “koo-koo.” The atmosphere felt enchanting.

We soon began playing hide-and-seek there. The place was so spacious and open that one could easily find countless spots to hide. After we tossed for turns, it was decided that I would be the one to hide.

I told them to count to one hundred, and they began, “one, two, three...” As they counted, I hurried upstairs. Every room in the house had a number plate on its door, and I decided to hide on the second floor, where there were many rooms lined up in order. My eyes fell on room number 211, and I quickly moved toward it.

When I opened the door of 211, I found it to be quite large and surprisingly beautiful. Inside, there were many old things, antique crafts, historical paintings, weathered books, and stacks of yellowed newspapers. It felt as if I had stepped into another time. The room was filled with such strange yet fascinating objects that I stood there, completely absorbed and lost in their presence.

On one wall, a heavy brown curtain hung from ceiling to floor, covering it entirely. Its presence intrigued me. I couldn't help but wonder what might be hidden behind it, perhaps some old embroidery, or a forgotten treasure. My curiosity grew stronger with every passing second, and I felt an irresistible urge to pull it aside and uncover what lay hidden behind.

I reached near that curtain and suddenly removed it quickly. When I removed the veil, I saw a different world where there were big trees and snow everywhere. But the nature there was different, quite unlike this world. I placed my foot on the ground and heard the noise of clouds growing louder, and the winds began to blow faster. In a moment I was stunned, and I heard the scary sound of many eagles.

I got scared and started going back inside through the wall, but when I looked, the wall was closed and I could not see any way to

return. I moved towards the jungle, and the weather was very cold, maybe even below zero.

I was shivering when I heard the sound of someone walking behind me. When I turned around, he quickly hid behind the trees. I slowly went near the tree, and when I saw him, I screamed in fear. My voice echoed throughout the jungle. Then I started hearing footsteps from every direction, all coming closer to me. The man who was standing near the tree had a human-like body, but his skin was like that of a lion. His nails were long and his feet were sharp. I was shocked to see him. The sounds of footsteps grew louder and faster.

The lion-man held my hand and said, "Let's run away." I did not understand anything, but I started running with him. We reached a cave where it was very dark. The lion-man collected wood and set it on fire, and a faint light appeared. He also started roasting a chicken on the fire. I warmed myself near the flames because I was feeling very cold.

I asked him his name, and he said, "My name is Leonide." Then he added, "This is a magical forest where human beings are killed."

I asked him, "Then why did you bring me into this cave? Did you bring me here to save me?"

"No. I have brought you to the cave to kill you." He started laughing loudly.

I went near him, smiling, and placed my hand on his shoulder fur. "If I played hide-and-seek for the reason that I would hide so far away that nobody could find me, then maybe it's my good luck,

because I had prayed to hide in a place where no one could find me. And if I die, obviously no one will be able to find me, and I will become a dream or a story for the world.”

“By the way, who respects living people? People pray for enlightenment only after death. And I am very lucky that I will die in this forest, where I will find death like magic,” the lion-man said, laughing. “Aren’t you afraid of death? Everyone has to die. Friend, today I will kill you;

tomorrow you will be the same, right?”

Tears filled my eyes. “Did you call me friend?” I asked. “I am ugly. I don’t even have a complete human shape. You still called me a friend so easily, why?”

I smiled and said, “Here even people who look like humans are not truly human at all.” The world is like this magic forest, where beasts are found among humans and humans are found among animals.

Isn’t it magic?

The lion-man happily placed the roasted chicken in front of me and asked me to eat it. He said, “The plan to kill you has been cancelled. You are alone and I am alone. From today we are good friends, and whatever we do, we will do together. I know a lot of magic; I will teach you some too. But I will not teach you how to get back to that world.”

“Ok, I don’t even want to go!” I spoke.

Taking a long breath, I looked toward the mountains and said goodbye to my world. After that, I began living happily in the

magic forest, and I also learned a lot of magic. When I opened my eyes, the dream felt so beautiful that I wished it would come true.

About Nida Heer is already mentioned in previous stories.

Once You Open, There's No Return

Story by Salika Samoon

In a forgotten town, where winters bit through bone and silence draped itself over cracked mud houses, there stood a building no one entered. Once, it had been a community hall full of music, laughter, and weddings. But decades ago, the hall had seen a tragedy no one could forget. A young bride, barely seventeen, was forced into a marriage she did not want. On her wedding day, surrounded by people celebrating her misery, she fled into the hall. Hours later, her body was found hanging from the rafters, her bridal dupatta knotted around her neck, swaying gently above the dusty floor. Her cries had gone unheard. After that day, the hall was abandoned. No wedding was ever held there again. Children whispered that the hall was haunted by her restless spirit. They claimed it whispered lessons of madness instead of wisdom and dared each other to touch its door and run. Adults dismissed it as superstition. Until Saima came. Saima, a young schoolteacher, rented a small house right next to the hall. The first night she unpacked her belongings, the air felt colder than usual. The street outside was cloaked in fog, pressing against her window like a living thing. Then she heard it. Three sharp knocks.

Tak. Tak. Tak.

It came from the hall's door. She froze. No one was outside. Then came a voice, deep and hollow. "Open." Saima whispered to

herself, It's just the wind, just the wind. But she could not sleep. The next night, the knocking returned, louder, angrier. Tak. Tak. TAKKK. "Open. I have been waiting." Her hands shook as she tried to convince herself it was all imagination. The following morning, her elderly neighbor, Amma Begum, stopped her outside. Her eyes were clouded but sharp. "Do not answer. Never answer. Once you open the door, it will open you." Saima laughed nervously, pretending she did not care, but each evening, as the sun fell, her heart raced. By the third night, the voice had changed. It was no longer hollow, no longer distant. It was familiar. "Saima, please, open. It's so cold outside." Her father's voice. Dead for seven years. Then came her mother's, soft and trembling. "Don't you love us, Saima? Just open the door." Her chest tightened. Her palms clamped over her ears. "No, no," she whispered. Determined to prove it was all imagination, Saima lit a lantern and sat facing the hall. Midnight passed. Almost nothing. She almost laughed at herself. Then Tak. Tak. Tak.

The door shook. Shadows twisted across the walls like crawling smoke. Dozens of voices joined in, her students, friends, colleagues, crying, accusing, begging. "Why are you ignoring us?" "Open. Open now." The lantern flickered violently and went out. In the darkness, she heard the slow creak of the hall's door moving on its own. Three days passed and no one had seen Saima. She hadn't come to school, hadn't answered calls, and her door remained locked. By the evening of the third day, her friend and colleague, Sakshi, could not sit still any longer. The sun had already dipped behind the fog-drenched hills as she walked toward Saima's house. The lane was unusually silent. Even the dogs that

usually barked at strangers were nowhere to be heard. The closer she got, the heavier the air felt, thick and almost suffocating. Sakshi reached the gate and pushed it gently. It creaked open on its own. The sound sliced through the silence. "Saima?" she called softly. No answer. The windows were dark. The curtains inside moved slightly, though the windows were closed. Her throat tightened. "Saima, it's me, Sakshi. Please say something." She slowly stepped inside. The room was cold, damp, and smelled faintly of burnt oil mixed with something rotten. On the floor lay scattered papers, a broken teacup, and a lantern turned on its side. Then she heard it, a faint scratching sound. It came from the wall that separated Saima's house from the old hall. Sakshi froze, straining to listen. The scratching stopped. Then, from behind her, came a whisper. "Sakshi..." She spun around. In the dim light, she saw Saima standing at the end of the hallway. Her face was pale and hollow, her eyes wide and glassy as though she had not slept for days. Her hair hung loose and tangled, sticking to her damp cheeks. She was not wearing shoes. Her feet were bruised, and her clothes were torn and dusty. Sakshi gasped and ran toward her. "Oh my God, Saima! What happened? Where were you?" Saima did not respond. Her eyes did not move from the wall that faced the old hall. Her lips trembled before she whispered, voice shaking, "Don't go near it. She doesn't like the noise." Sakshi's heart pounded. "Who doesn't?" Saima's voice cracked. "The bride. She's awake again." Before Sakshi could ask another word, Saima's body went rigid. Her eyes rolled back, and she collapsed to the floor with a dull thud. The lantern she was holding slipped from her hand and shattered.

The small flame flickered once, then went out, leaving the room in suffocating darkness. Sakshi screamed and rushed to her, shaking her shoulders. "Saima! Wake up! Please!" But Saima did not move. Outside, the wind howled through the broken windows. From somewhere near the hall came three soft knocks. Tak. Tak. Tak. The sound echoed through the night as Sakshi froze, tears streaming down her face. She grabbed Saima's wrist. There was still a pulse. "Somebody help!" she screamed, her voice breaking. Moments later, neighbour's arrived with lanterns and rushed Saima to the hospital. No one dared look toward the hall. Saima's body was cold as if she had been walking in snow. She woke once, her eyes wild and glassy. Her lips trembled as she whispered, "I did not open the door. She opened it herself." Then she went still. By morning, the nurse found her bed empty. The door to her room was locked from the inside. Authorities, accompanied by villagers, went to the hall with torches and search teams. The building was empty. No body. No trace. Only faint, ragged scratches on the inside of the hall's door, spelling something like "I tried." Weeks passed after Saima's disappearance, but the town did not heal. Instead, it grew quieter. The fog came earlier each evening, curling down the streets like smoke. Doors were locked before sunset, and even the usual sounds of the town seemed distant and hollow. One night, Imran, a delivery boy, was returning home from work. His route took him past the old community hall, a path most people avoided now. The air was heavy with mist, so thick that his motorbike's headlight barely lit a few meters ahead. He kept his eyes on the road, humming softly to distract himself. But the sound died in his throat when he heard a faint whisper. "Imran,

come closer.” He froze, the engine still running. “Who’s there?” he called out, his voice shaking. No reply. Only the distant creak of something wooden, maybe the hall’s old door. He tried to convince himself it was just the wind. But then came another whisper. “Imran, you promised you’d play with me.” His heart stopped. That voice, he knew it. It was Ayesha, his little sister, the one who had drowned two years ago. He turned his head slowly. The fog seemed to thin, just enough for him to see her. She stood in the middle of the road, barefoot, her red dress soaked, her hair dripping wet. “Ayesha?” he whispered, stepping off the bike.

“Is it really you?” She smiled faintly. “You left me there. It’s cold.” Tears filled his eyes. “No, I didn’t mean to.” Before he could finish, her expression twisted into something hollow and dark. Her voice deepened. “Come play with me. Everyone’s waiting.” Behind her, shapes began to form, shadows of dozens of figures, faces blurred, whispering his name. “Imran, Imran.” Fear rooted him to the ground. The air around him turned icy. His breath came in short gasps. Then, from a distance, a bell rang somewhere in the town. The sound was steady and human, and for a moment everything stilled. The figures froze. The little girl’s head turned sharply toward the sound, her expression twisting in pain. She let out a low, distorted wail before dissolving back into the mist. Imran stumbled back to his bike, trembling. He started it with shaking hands and sped away, not daring to look back. When he reached home, his mother was waiting at the door. She held a small tasbeeh in her hand and whispered softly, sprinkling a little blessed water on his forehead. “The fog follows the weak, beta. Do not listen when it calls your name.” That night, Imran stayed awake, clutching the small tasbeeh. Outside, the fog brushed past

his window, but it did not enter. From that day, he avoided the road near the hall. But even now, when the fog returns, he swears he can hear her faintly, not calling him anymore, but crying somewhere far away. Some claimed they saw Saima's silhouette in her empty house window, staring toward the hall. Others swore they heard her voice calling softly from the fog. And all remembered the bride, the first soul that never found peace. Her sorrow had grown into something darker, something that reached beyond the walls. They said she no longer waited for people to enter the hall. Now, she came to them. At night, if you walk past that lane, you'll hear it, a faint knock, then a whisper. "We are still waiting... Will you join us?" Even behind locked doors, some swear they hear footsteps pause at the threshold, a breath against the window, a voice so familiar it's impossible not to listen. And if you listen too long, you might answer. Moral Fear often begins in disbelief. Some forces, natural or beyond understanding, cannot be ignored. Curiosity, arrogance, and denial have their price. Some doors are never meant to be opened. Because once you open them, they open you..

About Salika Samoon

Salika Samoon, a co-author of this anthology, hails from the picturesque valley of Gurez. She is currently pursuing her Master's degree, balancing her academic journey with her love for creative expression. Through her writings, Salika brings forth the unseen layers of human emotions and experiences, weaving them with sensitivity and depth. Being part of this anthology reflects her passion for storytelling and her belief in the power of words to connect, heal, and inspire.

Part IV:
Inner Landscapes

My Battle with OCD: From Struggle to Strength

By Seerat Iqbal

I am a girl from Kashmir. I belong to a beautiful village called Shai Hall. It is here that I grew up, here that I studied, and here that I still live today. I want to share a story with you—a story deeply connected to my real life. Today, I am 19 years old, but for the past 10 years, I have lived through a battle. It was a fight I faced every single day, and now I want to share a part of that journey with you. Because life itself is a battlefield—filled with challenges we must all face with courage and faith. My story begins when I first stepped into school to start my educational journey. I was very young back then, just a little child taking her first steps into the world of learning. But just as I began to settle in at school, a quiet battle began within me—a battle I had to fight from the inside. Perhaps it already existed before, but I was unaware of it. The moment I entered school, the moment I came face-to-face with people, that hidden battle suddenly woke up. And what was that battle? It was a fear that trapped me inside a single emotion, holding me down so tightly that finding a way out felt impossible. Day by day, it grew stronger. I began to see myself as inferior. I felt as if every student in the class was better than me, always ahead of me at every step. But in reality, that was not the truth. I had qualities they didn't, and they had qualities I didn't. In some

ways, I was ahead of them. Yet, that one overpowering emotion completely changed my mind. I began to see myself as less than everyone else. I believed that even in physical appearance, they were better than me—more beautiful, more perfect—while I was the worst, the one who was never good enough. Slowly, changes began to appear in my personality. I became shy and overly emotional. I would cry over the smallest things. Even when asked a simple question, I would end up giving my replies through tears. Tears flowed automatically from my eyes, and my voice would break as though I was collapsing inside. This change made me despise who I was becoming. I started to feel as though everyone hated me, as if no one truly loved me. Days passed in this way, and I began developing strange behaviours. At times, it even felt as though something had taken over me—like I was possessed by an unseen force. Whatever I did, it felt as though something was forcing me to do it. I began repeating actions again and again. If I took a step, I would repeat it. If I wrote something, I would cross it out and rewrite it, sometimes multiple times. In this way, I found myself trapped in repetitive actions, unable to break free. With every step I took, with every breath I breathed, I felt as though an unseen force was controlling me. It was as if I was being pulled away from everyone else—set apart, no longer like the people around me. I began to feel that the whole world was on one side, and I was standing alone on the other. It felt as though someone lived inside me, constantly sitting in my mind, telling me what to do. It pushed me to repeat things again and again, forcing me into awkward and strange behaviours, making me do things I couldn't even understand myself. Whenever I performed those repetitive

actions, my family sometimes noticed. At times, when I repeated something, it even created a sound—something my family could hear too. But they understood it differently. They began to see me as someone separate from themselves. Since I used to pray and recite the Qur'an, they thought I was just a deeply religious child. But one day, I decided not to give up. I gathered my courage and began writing in my diary. From that very moment, small changes started to appear within me. In those pages, I even shared the incidents I had been going through—I wrote honestly about what was really happening to me. Two years later, I asked myself a question: Why am I like this? Other people don't behave this way. They live freely, doing everything without fear. They are confident, unafraid, and not held back by shyness. Then why am I different? Why am I trapped in this? That question stayed with me, and I began to reflect deeply on it. And then, I realized the symptoms I was facing—the repetitive actions, the constant thoughts in my mind telling me something bad will happen if I don't do this or that—I started searching for their meaning. The things I had been desperately trying to find solutions for within myself, I finally decided to check on Google. And that was the moment I discovered the name of what I was going through: a disorder called OCD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. It is a condition where a person is trapped in repetitive thoughts, and where every action or task feels like it must be repeated again and again. But at that moment, I also felt a sense of relief. When I discovered that OCD exists in many people, I realized I was not alone in this battle. There are so many who are silently fighting the same struggle, and there are also many who have managed to come out of it—who have fought

and won their battles. I also felt happy when I realized this. For so long, I thought I was somehow different from others, that I was awkward or strange. But when I learned about OCD, I understood that it was not me—it was a disorder. And if this was a disorder, then surely there must also be a solution. After all, every problem has a solution, and this one would have it too.

Then I began my own investigation. I started researching OCD—where it comes from, why it happens, and how it can be overcome. I was determined to understand it deeply, so I began to study and explore it step by step. And that's when I learned something important: we become what we think. If I tell myself that I am good, then goodness will begin to grow within me—confidence, positive qualities, and strength. But if I keep telling myself that I am bad, then negativity will take over me, and I will only end up hating myself. I convinced my mind that if I begin everything with Bismillah—in the name of Allah—then nothing will go wrong. Nothing bad will happen afterward. This belief became my strength, and in this way, I began to train and convince myself. And it turned out to be true. When a person begins something with Bismillah, the work goes right, and no obstacle stands in the way. I realized that, and so I started taking Islamic perspectives and solutions, and I applied them to my own life. And slowly, I came out of it. I began to calm my OCD and gained control over it. Many changes came into my life—I started becoming confident, I began to see myself as good, and those awkward behaviours were no longer controlling me. Even now, sometimes when a difficult situation comes up, or when I face people who make me feel afraid or uncomfortable, I can sense my OCD trying to trap me again.

But it no longer defines me. Now, I am able to face it with strength. In the end, it is always my victory. I rise above it, and OCD is defeated. That is why I chose Psychology as my subject. I wanted to study and understand it deeply—to know what emotions are, how the mind works, and what OCD really is. Through my studies, I realized that OCD was nothing more than whispers of the mind, thoughts that tried to control me but could never define me. I came to realize that it was from Shaytan. He is the one who whispers and provokes us: do this, do that. Even when I was doing good deeds, like reciting an Ayah, I would repeat it again and again. And then I would feel guilty, thinking I was doing it wrong. But in truth, it was Shaytan trying to make me hopeless. By the mercy of Allah, I understood this. And today, I am completely fine. I share my story with everyone because I have realized something important: parents must pay close attention to their children. If a child is showing awkward or unusual behaviours, parents should not ignore them but try to understand why this is happening. In truth, our entire life is shaped by the unconscious mind, and that unconscious mind is formed in childhood. And the things that I used to fear in childhood, today I no longer fear them at all. Among them, the greatest fear I had was the fear of death. But now, through the Islamic perspective, I have come to realize that this world is temporary; it is nothing compared to the Hereafter. And with this realization, I no longer fear death. This struggle was no greater than any other, yet it brought me deep pain—and, paradoxically, profound gifts. In time, it ceased to feel like a war and became a lesson. I learned that when a person truly wills something, nothing is impossible; “impossible” only describes

what lies beyond our control. God has endowed us with many inner strengths which, when consciously applied, transform our lives. I discovered that the human mind is an extraordinary instrument: once we learn to harness it, even the most difficult tasks become manageable. Because the mind is so sensitive, it needs careful tending—by shaping our thoughts we can set our whole life on a better path. This is how I was once trapped in OCD, and today, I have emerged completely free from its hold.

“Seerat ki khamosi mein bhi ek dastaan chhupi hai, Har lafz se gehri uski nigaahon ki zubaan chhupi hai.”

About Seerat Iqbal

From Handwara in Kupwara district, Kashmir, Seerat Iqbal carries the essence of her hometown into her creative journey. Rooted in Srinagar, her writings reflect both the simplicity of her surroundings and the depth of her thoughts. With a passion for expression, she continues to explore the power of words as a way to connect, reflect, and inspire.

When My Body Froze

By: Bilal Zaheer

It was just an ordinary night. I lay down to sleep like always, but suddenly my whole body felt extremely heavy. It was as if something was pressing me down, not letting me move at all. I could not even lift a finger. For a moment, it felt like something had entered me and taken control.

I wanted to shout, but no sound came out. My eyes were open, my heart was racing, but I was completely stuck in my own body. Those few moments felt endless, and I thought I would never be able to move again. Then, all at once, it was over.

My body became light again, almost as if a wave of air had passed through me. I could finally breathe and move. Even now, the memory of that night still scares me. I do not know whether it was just a dream, sleep paralysis, or something beyond explanation.

Note: This is my personal experience.

About Bilal Zaheer

My journey began in a madrasa, where I first discovered my love for writing. Weekly programs there allowed me to deliver speeches and write essays, helping me realize how much I enjoy expressing myself through words.

Today, I live in New Delhi and am pursuing my first year of B.A. at Jamia Millia Islamia. This chapter of my life offers new opportunities to learn, grow, and explore ideas that shape who I am.

The Cave I Outgrew

Story by : Bilal Zaheer

When I was small, the cave felt like it belonged to me. I knew its path as well as my own street — the banyan tree at the fork, the stone that rang when rain touched it, and the narrow crack in the wall where cool air whispered out. Inside, the cave glowed softly, as if it had its own hidden lamp.

I mapped it in my mind with steps and touches. The rock beside the entrance had a hollow where my hand fit perfectly. I would squeeze through the gap, and it always let me in. The tunnel curved like a hallway in a half-remembered house. There were mossy ledges, and a thin stream that spoke in ripples. Every corner felt like it had a meaning, even if I didn't understand it yet.

As I grew older, the cave began to change. The gap that once welcomed me started resisting. I had to bend, fold, and struggle to fit through. My body grew taller and wider, but the cave stayed the same. Some nights I woke up with the feeling of being stuck, as if I had tried to return to a place that no longer fit me.

Yet the cave was more than stone. Sometimes it was a shelter, where the sound of dripping water comforted me like a lullaby. Other times, it was a test — a challenge to see if I could still pass, if I could still shrink or stretch myself to move forward. It taught

me about change, about how to breathe through tight spaces and trust the other side.

Eventually, reason told me it wasn't real. Friends said no such cave existed, that it was only a mix of childhood corners and imagined spaces.

But to me, it still felt real — as familiar as the face of a friend. Even as an adult, I could walk its path in dreams.

One night, the dream shifted. I reached the crack in the wall, but instead of squeezing, I pushed. The rock gave way, just enough, and behind it was not another tunnel but a doorway. On the other side was morning light, the smell of bread, a room I didn't know but somehow belonged to. For the first time, I entered without shrinking.

I woke with the map still in my head, but it had changed. The cave remained, but beyond it there was now a door. It was proof, not that the cave was real, but that places — even dream places — can teach us how to grow into the size we're meant to be.

About Bilal is already mentioned in previous story.

Innocence is a crime

By Haroon Iqbal Wani

I am the enemy of my own life,
I kill my expectations with limitation's knife.
Now I understand the truth of this time,
To be an innocent is the biggest crime.
I kicked a stone just to clear the road,
They wrote my name on the wanted board.
By wounds and taunts my heart became grill,
This whole world is against my will.
Expectations and desires reach a sill,
People think my mentality is nil.
Everyone wants to be right,
While hiding black souls in coloured white.

About Haroon Iqbal Wani

My name is Haroon Iqbal Wani, and I belong to the beautiful Chingam Valley of Kishtwar. I passed my Class 12th last year, but my journey as a writer began much earlier, when I was in Class 8. What first drew me toward writing was the profound influence of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. His words and vision inspired me to pick up the pen and begin writing poems of my own. Over time, writing has become more than just a hobby—it is a way for me to reflect, express, and connect. Through my poetry, I hope to carry forward the spark that first ignited in me after reading Dr. Kalam, and to share thoughts that might inspire others just as I was once inspired.

The Broken Wings of a Father's Dream

Story by: Muddasir Ahmed Najjar

In a small town surrounded by green fields, tall chinar trees, and quiet rivers, there lived a man named Rahim. He was not a rich man, but in his heart, he was wealthier than kings. He owned a modest home built with his own hands, a few acres of land that provided just enough to survive, and the most precious treasure of his life: his children. Rahim was known among his neighbours as a man of honesty and hard work. From dawn until dusk, he worked with his hands, tilling the land, carrying loads of wood, and sweating under the burning sun. Yet, he never complained. Every drop of sweat on his forehead was a silent prayer for his children's future. He often reminded himself, "If I cannot give them gold, I will give them knowledge. If I cannot leave them a palace, I will leave them honour. If I cannot live forever, my children will be my legacy."

And so, Rahim raised his children with a balance of love and discipline. He ate little, wore simple clothes, and rarely bought anything for himself, but when it came to his children, he gave everything he could afford. He sent them to the best schools nearby, often walking long miles just to save the fare for their books. When the world slept, Rahim stayed awake under the dim glow of a lantern, making plans in his heart for their future. His greatest dream was to see them reach heights he had only

imagined, to succeed where he had failed. He often whispered into the night air, “O God, let their wings fly where my feet could never walk.” The Bloom of Hope Years passed, and Rahim’s children began to grow. They were bright, intelligent, and full of dreams. Their father’s words were like seeds in their hearts: “Work harder than me, my children. The world is wide, and your place in it is waiting for you.” They listened, and they worked. One son became a respected businessman, learning the art of trade and building his name. Another pursued higher education, dreaming of bringing honour to the family through knowledge. His daughter, inspired by Rahim’s sacrifices, started a small career of her own. Rahim’s sacrifices began to bloom into hope. The meals he skipped so his children could eat well, the winter nights he spent without a warm blanket so his children could buy books, and the years of endless toil—all of it seemed to be turning into light. The neighbours admired him. “Rahim is a blessed man,” they would say. “His children are his wealth, his pride. They will carry his name with honour.” And Rahim, hearing these words, felt his chest swell with joy. In his old age, he thought he could finally rest. Sitting in the courtyard in the evening breeze, he would smile to himself and whisper, “Thank you, O Lord, for making my children the pride of my life.” For Rahim, life seemed complete. The Silent Fall But life, in its cruel nature, is unpredictable. Dreams, no matter how strong, are fragile threads that can snap without warning. A few years later, Rahim noticed changes in his children. At first, they were small: less time at home, more interest in luxuries, new friends who spoke more of wealth than wisdom. Rahim thought it was normal, a part of growing up in the modern world. He told

himself, “They are young. They will learn balance. This too shall pass.” But behind his back, his children were stepping into a world of greed and false promises. They began to take risks with their father’s hard-earned savings. They invested in businesses they did not understand, trusted people who only saw them as prey, and in chasing quick wealth, they forgot the slow and honest lessons of their father. One mistake led to another. Slowly, they began to lose not just money but also their morals. Lies replaced honesty, greed replaced contentment, and arrogance silenced humility. Rahim, unaware of the storm building, continued to defend them proudly. To his neighbours, he said with a glowing smile, “My children are working hard. They will build something even greater than I ever dreamed!” But the truth was different.

The Father’s Broken Heart Three years later, reality struck Rahim like a lightning bolt. His children had lost everything: the savings of a lifetime, the land, the house, and even their respect in society. They had fallen into debts so deep that their names were whispered with shame throughout the town. The home once filled with hope was now heavy with silence. When Rahim finally discovered the truth, his world collapsed. The man who once walked with pride now bent under the weight of sorrow. One night, with a trembling voice, Rahim called his children to him. The room was dimly lit, but the pain in his eyes shone brighter than any flame. He said, his voice breaking, “I gave my life for you. I starved so you could eat. I stayed awake so you could dream. I sacrificed every joy so you could stand tall. Why? Why did you throw it all away?” His children sat in silence; their eyes lowered in shame. Not one of them could answer. The silence was heavier than a

thousand words. Tears rolled down Rahim's wrinkled face. "I believed in you more than I believed in myself. But you... you have taken away not just wealth, but my faith, my peace, my very soul." That night, Rahim sat alone in the courtyard under the vast sky.

The stars above seemed distant, as if even they refused to comfort him. His heart whispered in sorrow: "I gave them everything...but they lost themselves." From that day on, Rahim's life became a shadow of what it once was. The laughter that had once filled his house was gone. The walls that had echoed with hope now heard only silence. The pride in his eyes was replaced with endless tears. The Lesson Rahim's story spread quietly among the people of the town. His house became a symbol, a reminder of how easily dreams can be built, and how easily they can be destroyed. "This was once a home of dreams," people would whisper when they passed his courtyard. "But now it is a house of sorrow." Rahim, in his old age, carried only one truth in his heart: "Love and sacrifice can build a dream, but choice can destroy it." Reflection In the final years of his life, Rahim no longer prayed for wealth or honour. He prayed only for forgiveness—for his children, and perhaps, for himself. He wondered if he had loved them too much, if he had shielded them so fiercely from hardship that they never learned its true value. Sometimes, he would sit beneath the same tree where he had once spun tales of honesty and courage. Alone, he whispered to the wind, "Maybe I should have been stricter. Maybe I should have let them stumble when they were young, so they could learn how to rise on their own..." But life does not return what it has taken. His story endured as both a tragedy and a lesson, a quiet testament that dreams demand not only sacrifice

to build, but also wisdom to preserve. Suddenly, one of his children's voices pierced through his dream. His eyes snapped open, and he drew in a deep, shuddering breath, realizing, with a jolt, that it had all been just a dream.

About Muddasir Ahmed Najar

Hailing from Dandmoha, Kreeri, Baramulla—a serene place surrounded by greenery and flowing streams—Muddasir is a postgraduate student of Politics, deeply engaged in exploring society and governance. His journey into writing began with curiosity and soon turned into a passion. Alongside his academic pursuits, he finds joy in storytelling, using it as a medium to share his thoughts and connect with others.

The Room Horror

Story by: Sara

This happened to me when I was six or seven years old. I remember every detail of it. It's not a very long story, but one day back in 2009–2010, when I was in nursery class, something unforgettable occurred. There was this one big room in my old home. I was sitting on my small chair, alone, while my parents were in another room. As I sat facing the window, something huge and white—like a tall pole appeared in front of me. I froze for a minute.

The moment I unfroze, I shouted, “Mamaaaa!” I couldn't even run at first. But then, somehow, I managed to move and dashed to my parent's room, which was on the same floor. I still remember that day, and it gives me chills. Now, years later I've come to know from my cousins and family that the same room was always considered haunted for some reason.

About Sara

Sara, from Hyderpora, is a student currently pursuing her B.A. (Honours) in the 5th semester. While she does not consider herself a writer, her participation in this anthology reflects her willingness to explore new creative spaces and share her perspective through words.

My House Like a Mountain

By Nida Heer

When I returned home, the kids were playing outside. They all ran toward me in high spirits, surrounding me with laughter and energy. I smiled, and after passing through them, I started moving inside.

Someone opened the door and called me in. Inside, everyone looked happy to see me. “Will you come, come on! How was today’s picnic? Did you enjoy it? What was the scene there?”

I laughed and said, “Hey, wait, wait! Let me breathe first! I’m very tired. I’ll tell you everything, but comfortably.”

I drank a glass of water and rested my head in Mom’s embrace. Then I began recounting excitedly, “There was so much fun in nature! The wind... ahh, it was amazing! The water was flowing, and the kids were playing in it. We even had a water fight!”

Hey! You know, my brother put me in the water at first, I was very scared, but once I got in, all my fear disappeared. After that, we ate ice cream, enjoyed a lot of junk food, and roamed around the entire mountain. We saw so many things in the hills that we had never noticed before.

There were dense trees scattered everywhere, new flowers blooming, and waterfalls flowing gracefully. We even found some fruits, cherries, apricots, and lychees, but they weren’t quite

cherries; they were smaller and deep red. Tasting them felt like eating a fruit straight from heaven.

“Wow, Mom, how peaceful was there!” I exclaimed.

When we returned, we went for a boat ride, with water gushing backward as we moved. White ducks and fish swam in the water while birds soared above. Kingfishers swooped down to catch fish, and many people were enjoying the scenery around us. We had so much fun.

Later, when I looked at Dal Lake, the whole scene was magical. Lights sparkled in the fountains at night, casting rainbow colours over the water. Even the people looked colourful in the glow.

Brother laughed and pulled my cheeks, saying, “My sister is colourful too, like the water!”

I laughed and replied, “Oh! Brother, you enjoyed it so much that even the water seems colourful to you! Hahaha!”

And that’s how the water, though colourless by nature, somehow looked alive and vibrant to us that evening.

He replied, “Crazy girl! Water is colourful, whatever you mix in it, it becomes like that. Right, right? Isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes! You must be a philosopher who came from afar,” I teased.

He laughed. “Yes, I am... hahahaha.”

Ammi interrupted, smiling, “Hey! Why do both of you keep fighting with each other?”

I laughed. “Ammi, where are we fighting? It’s fun, bro, fun!”

Suddenly, Father opened the door and asked, “Who are you talking to?”

I looked around, and there was no one there. My cheeks flushed, and my heart began to race. I remembered that whenever I returned home before, the house would be full of noise, laughter, and playful conversations. Ammi, brother, Dad, all of them would be laughing and joking, and everyone would gather to listen to the stories.

But today, when I came home, everything was quiet. The silence in the house felt as deep and still as the mountains outside.

There is only the echo of laughter in my ears—a sound that no longer exists in reality. Here remain only the memories, like the rare flowers that bloom high in the mountains, waiting to be discovered.

My home feels like that hill, where only the gentle chirping of birds persists. Are these birds listening to the silence inside me? Can they carry the storm of my heart to my family?

Will they wait for me, just as I wait for them? Is it true that we will meet again in heaven? And will I ever get back the home filled with laughter, warmth, and the familiar sounds I once knew?

I shook myself out of my thoughts, smiling faintly at Papa. I said, trying to hide the swirl of emotions within me. “You freshen up, Papa. I’m preparing dinner for you. I’m just too tired today,”

Divine Love

Story by Nafeesa Gulzar

I don't know why people think I'm mad.

I came from dust and to dust I will return.

Does my story look a little different?

I met a girl who was about seven years old. This seven-year-old girl, in everything she did, whether joy or sadness, always remembered her Lord. She would tell me about a dream in which her body seemed to rise toward the sky, and over it names appeared written in the heavens. Those names were not of anyone else, but of the Most Merciful Lord. When the girl told her grandmother, who was connected to Sufism, about this dream, the grandmother advised her to keep it private. But the frightened child told those close to her. With time, the child learned about Sufism. Although she wanted to follow it, because her entire family was connected to it, her grandmother became her murshad, her spiritual guide. When the child spoke to her murshad about Divine Love, the murshad would whisper guidance in her ear and ask her to be patient and silent. As the girl grew older, she discovered spiritual truths one by one, and her passion for Sufism deepened. As her yearning to meet God increased, she would climb the first steps of the spiritual path but sometimes fall back because of mistakes and worldly desires, the stage known as

nafs-e-ammarah, where the self is driven by base impulses. She tried to overcome this state, but as people say, nothing happens without God's will. One day, tired of the world and its illusions, at the age of twenty, after ten long years of seeking, she finally saw through the world's traps.

At last, her efforts bore fruit. Every day one question lived in her heart.

“Who am I? Why does everyone tell me to ‘know yourself’?

What do people see in me when they say this?

Who am I really?

What is my name?

Where have I come from?

Why am I here?

Who sent me into this world?”

These questions followed her, and somewhere along the way she fell in love with Him without even realizing it. Time passed and she entered the second stage, nafs-e-lawwama, the self-reproaching soul, the awakening of conscience. Whenever she was about to do wrong, a feeling would arise in her heart:

“If I do this, maybe I’ll lose my Lord.” Her purpose became never to hurt anyone’s heart, because the heart is God’s home. If someone’s heart breaks, then prayer and worship lose their meaning. She began to help everyone, making it her life’s mission. But this work was not easy. Accusations and slander can follow such a path. Sometimes these are the result of others’

misunderstandings, and sometimes they are tests from God. As time went on, she had dreams she could not easily explain, and she was amazed at God's power. These were the days when she had renounced worldly desires, and her murshad continued to show her the way. She kept moving forward. Her life began to change. Words of others no longer wounded her. If someone accused her, she would smile. Her voice grew gentle, and even she was surprised by the change.

This is only a glimpse of her life's many sides. I have been lost in Your love. Tell me, what should I do to reach You? You gave me the roads that lead to You, yet no one revealed the full secret of my journey. Calling out to You, I speak: He said "Be," and it was.

About Nafeesa Gulzar

Nafeesa Gulzar is a Semester 3rd student at Amar Singh College, Srinagar. She is serving as the NSS head ,where she actively contributes to community service and leadership activities. Alongside her academic pursuits, she has a deep passion for fine arts, especially painting and creative expression.

Part V:
Tales of Intrigue

A Strange Evening in Kishtwar

Imtiaz Ahmed Kichloo

It began one afternoon when Imtiaz had a verbal spat with a man from his locality. The disagreement was heated, and though nothing physical occurred, voices were raised. What made it stranger was that the man's wife was rumoured among villagers to be involved in magical practices. Most people avoided conflicts with that family, but Imtiaz, being a logical man of science, never believed in such tales.

Later, as night fell and silence gripped the mountains, Imtiaz started his journey home. It was around 8:30 p.m., the path dimly lit by faint moonlight. Suddenly, he felt something unusual. Small stones began falling towards him from nowhere. At first, he thought it might be mischief by some children, but the road was deserted. What startled him most was that the stones seemed to disappear the moment they touched the ground, leaving no trace behind. Fear gripped him. His scientific mind searched for a reason, but the darkness around him made the experience more terrifying. Without waiting longer, he hurried to his home.

Once inside, he narrated the entire incident to his father, a devout man who never missed the five daily prayers, namaz. Listening carefully, his father placed a hand on his shoulder and said softly:

"Beta, this is not ordinary. Such things happen when anger and curses take shape. Perhaps the woman whose husband you quarrelled with has revealed her magical powers. It is best to avoid enmity with such people."

The words of his father made Imtiaz reflect. The next day, with humility in his heart, he went back to the man and offered a sincere apology for the harsh words exchanged. The gesture brought peace, and the strange happenings never occurred again.

Thus ended the mysterious episode—part science, part belief, and part reminder that sometimes humility and kindness are the best shields against the unknown.

About Imtiaz Ahmed Kichloo

Imtiaz Ahmad Kichloo, M.Sc. (Chemistry), B.Ed., is a respected teacher from Kishtwar, Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Known for his discipline, dedication, and deep commitment to education, he has guided and inspired countless students through his teaching. Beyond the classroom, he has also contributed thoughtful articles, reflecting his interest in sharing knowledge and engaging with wider ideas. Admired for his sincerity and humility, Imtiaz Sir is remembered not only as a man of science but also as someone who values kindness, respect, and human connection.

You are Late

By Haroon Mehraj

On the darkest night, I found myself walking down a quiet street I had never seen before. The lamps glowed dimly, their yellow light flickering as though they were alive, breathing in the silence.

Everything looked ordinary—small houses, shuttered shops, empty sidewalks—yet the stillness was heavier than it should have been. With every step, I heard an echo. Not once, but twice, as if someone else was walking right behind me, perfectly in sync.

I turned around—no one. The street stretched endlessly in both directions, though I was certain it was short when I first stepped onto it. Then I saw it: a door. Standing alone, with no walls, no building—just a single wooden frame planted in the middle of the road. It was slightly open. Against my better judgment, I pushed it.

The moment I crossed through, I was inside a room I knew too well—my own bedroom. But it was faded, abandoned, as though it hadn't been lived in for years. Dust drifted in the air, and the clock on the wall ticked backward.

And there—on my bed—lay a figure. It was me. Eyes closed, breathing slowly. I tried to speak, to call out, but my throat was dry and soundless. Then, the other me opened its eyes and whispered: “You’re late.”

Before I could ask what, it meant, the street lamps flickered inside the room, and everything dissolved like smoke. I woke up with my heart racing, but the feeling lingered—like I hadn't truly returned from that place.

About Haroon Mehraj

My name is Haroon Mehraj. I hail from Kashmir, where every voice is shaped by beauty and burdens.

My journey with words began like a secret ,scribbles on torn pages, whispers in the dark, the kind of writing that tries to hold what silence cannot, what began as private notes turned into a calling. Writing became my way of breathing, sometimes a refuge, sometimes a rebellion, always a search. Writing is not just what I do, it is the path I take to remember, to question, and to dream aloud for others to hear.

You, Me and Who?

By Haroon Mehraj

It began in a place I don't remember entering. A small café stood at the corner of a street I didn't know. It was late evening, yet the light inside was soft, like it had been trapped between day and night. The café was empty, silent, but every chair and table looked as if people had just left a moment ago. Half-drunk cups, crumbs, a chair slightly pulled back.

I walked deeper inside, and that's when I froze. In the far corner, I saw myself. Sitting there, calmly, sipping tea as though it was the most natural thing. Same face, same clothes, same tired expression. For a moment, I thought it was a mirror, but there was no glass just another me, looking up slowly, eyes heavy with recognition.

He nodded toward the empty chair across from him. My legs moved before my mind could refuse, and I sat. The table between us was small, the kind that forces closeness. I noticed his hands they were my hands, but older, a little pale, veins showing more clearly.

Before I could speak, a third cup appeared on the table. Hot, steaming, freshly poured. No waiter, no footsteps. The chair across from us pulled back with a long creak, as if welcoming

someone unseen. The air shifted, dense, like the moment before a storm.

I whispered, “Who is this for?” but my voice cracked. My other self-smiled faintly, eyes glancing toward the empty seat. The spoon inside the untouched cup began to stir on its own, clinking against the porcelain rhythmically.

A presence sat with us unseen but undeniable. I felt pressure on the floorboards, the faint rustle of fabric, a low breath that wasn’t mine. I couldn’t look directly at it, but I knew it was there, between us.

Finally, the other me spoke, voice calm, almost resigned: “We’ve always been three.”

I wanted to ask, “Three who?” but the words stuck in my throat. My heart pounded as I felt something brush my shoulder from behind, gentle but unmistakably real. My cup shook in my hands, spilling tea onto the table. The unseen presence shifted closer, and for a moment, I thought I saw a shadow flicker on the wall taller than both of us, standing where no one stood.

The lights in the café flickered once, twice. My other self-raised his cup again, unbothered, as though he had accepted this long ago. I tried to stand, but the chair beneath me held me down like it didn’t want me to leave.

Then, in a single moment, the café dissolved into silence. No lights, no table, no other me. Just darkness. But when I woke up, I could still taste tea in my mouth, faintly bitter, as if I had actually drunk it.

About already mentioned in previous story.

He first meets her as an image

By Gowhan Ramzan

A photograph that arrives like a signal, precise and impossible to ignore. What begins as a youthful ache, an impulsive confession, a cold block, months of absence, does not resolve into ordinary heartbreak. Instead, the absence acquires agency. When she returns, she returns as something that obeys its own physics, an intrusive field that folds memory into reality and converts sleep into a chamber of deliberate pain. Her daytime gestures are ordinary enough: clandestine visits to a cramped room, money given when his gambling empties his pockets, bruises that point to violence no one names. Those facts root the narrative in the world of consequence. But at night she is not the woman he kissed. She is a phenomenon. The dreams she stages follow rules that feel engineered rather than random. Gravity bends at the edge of her presence, time elongates and slams back, and sound condenses into pressure that bruises the chest. Objects behave like talismans and transmitters. A forgotten tablet hums like a transmitter, a red phone pulses in the gate light like a beacon, a photograph lies on his chest with the weight of a meteorite. Each artifact anchors the visitation, making every dream insist upon a corporeal aftermath: waking with the taste of iron, with pain that has no physical cause, with fingerprints that no one else can see.

Twice she finds the same betrayal on his phone. Each discovery widens the fissure between them, but the truly violent reckoning is postponed into sleep. The dreams begin mild and escalate: first a visitation of sorrow, then a rehearsal of humiliation, then equipment-like manipulations of his senses. In one dream she makes the room he knows tilt like an inside-out planet. He crawls and the floor becomes a map of his failures. In another, the clutch of a bike, a small mechanical betrayal in waking life, morphs into an instrument of delay. Its grinding cry becomes a clock that counts down his chances, and the world contracts to the sound of failing gears until the dream snaps him awake with a real, aching impotence. The torment is not mere melodrama. It feels scientific. The visitation probes the boundaries of embodiment. Dream-objects leave residue, subjective time stretches so that a single conversation occupies the equivalent of months, and the narrator's cognitive processes are glossed with interference as if someone has tuned a radio to a frequency that scrubs memory and amplifies shame. The hauntings obey local laws, a dream-gravity, a thermal signature, a cadence of recurrence, until the protagonist cannot tell whether the body he inhabits at noon is the same system that survived the night's experiments. This is not a story that uses the paranormal as decoration. The haunting is procedural. She tortures him by simulating the mechanics of loss, orchestrating delays that mimic betrayal, producing tactile proofs that contradict waking reality, and re-enacting the family's shame with the intensity of a forensic reconstruction. The effect is cumulative. Each dream leaves him more certain that something with intent is rearranging his interior landscape. He stops trusting

simple narratives. The dream insists on causality where before there was only chance. And the reader is left with a creeping, technical dread: what if the heart's architecture can be reprogrammed by a visiting field?

About Gowhar Ramzan

Gowhar Ramzan is passionate about writing and exploring the depths of human emotions through words. Alongside his literary interests, he is deeply curious about science, philosophy, and quantum mechanics/physics, constantly seeking to understand the mysteries of the universe. His work reflects a blend of creativity and intellectual curiosity, making him a thoughtful and engaging contributor to this anthology.

Almost Forever

Story by: Tawheed Faraz

In a quiet city tucked between dust and silence, there lived a boy named Tayeer. He was nineteen, the kind of age where dreams are loud, but the world is louder. His daily routine was very simple and straight forward like spending time on books, doing part-time work, using headphones to stay different and shutting noises from outside world .But somewhere deep inside, he had a gentleness which he rarely revealed. Not because he didn't want to, but because he hadn't found the right place or person to share it. Far from him, in another city that smelled of old rains and strict rules, lived a girl named Fariha. She was eighteen—thoughtful, careful, cautious and quiet in a unique way that most people didn't notice. She lived in a strictly controlled society where people around her kept an eye on her , where rules and norms left truly a little room for freedom. But beneath her polite smiles and obedient gestures, she had hidden a spark of rebellion inside. They met online. No dramatic spark or destined signs, but just through a simple message, a reply and then another. A connection that didn't make noise but stayed. It began slowly—long texts, shy jokes with hesitations, late-night check-ins. They weren't in love yet, but they were getting there, drawn closer by something unspoken. What began as a way to pass time grew into something deeper,

though neither admitted it aloud. There was comfort in knowing someone was out there who listened.

Someone who made the day feel less dull. Tayer didn't know why he felt lighter when she replied. Fariha didn't know why her heart paused at his name. But something was beginning quietly, softly and unknowingly. The kind of beginning that develops without hinting what would be the cost of this in future. Now they started talking more than ever . Morning greetings turned into long conversations, and nights only felt complete when they ended with each other's voices. Tayer started waking up to her texts and falling asleep to her calls. A routine born not out of habit but something deeper. Out of something more tender, more deliberate. Fariha was unlike anyone he had ever known. She didn't try to be interesting, and maybe that's what made her unforgettable. Her words came slowly, measured, each thought deliberate. Her laugh was quiet, restrained, like she was guarding it. She shared stories of her family—her father's rare smiles, her mother's wordless conversations, the rebellion in every breath she took at home. He listened always. Tayer never interrupted when she spoke, even if she paused for too long. He knew the kind of weight silence could carry. She, in turn, began to know him too. The way he rubbed his face when he was nervous. The way his voice softened when he talked about things he loved. The way he never said "I miss you," but sometimes asked if she was still there, despite the fact that he knew she was. After a month, they knew too much about each other to pretend it was casual. But still, they didn't call it love. It was something becoming without force, like water carving rock—slowly, quietly, but certain. They hadn't met.

Not in person. Not yet. But they were already too close to walk away. Tayer was the first to say it. Not "I love you," not yet-but something close. One night, while they were both half-asleep on the phone, he said softly, "I wish I could just see you once. In real life. Just once." Fariha didn't answer at first. Then she whispered, "Me too. Every day." After that night, they became louder than the comfort. Their bond wasn't built on fantasy—it was real enough to ache. Pictures didn't help anymore.

Voice calls weren't enough. They felt the need for their presence. Eyes meeting without a screen's divide. Silence that felt like intimacy, not static. The plan formed gradually. Fariha treaded carefully—her family's watchful eyes always on her. Tayer had freedom but lacked money. Still, he started saving money by skipping meals, scrimping, piecing together enough for the journey. Two months later, they met. Tayer crossed cities alone—tired, nervous, alive with anticipation—leaving before dawn with a small bag and countless unspoken emotions. Fariha waited in a park, dressed in blue, clutching her phone like an anchor. When she saw him, she didn't rush forward. She just smiled, soft and shy. He smiled back, walking toward her like he'd always known the way. They didn't hug. Didn't cry. They just sat together for an hour on a stone bench. Talking like they had all the time in the world. It was only an hour. But it felt like everything. The second time they met, it was her birthday. Tayer planned a surprise and kept it secret. He didn't tell her he was coming. He just woke up super early, before the sky even turned blue, and hopped on a local train, then another, and finally a bus. In short six long hours of travel, all for one precious hour with her. When he finally saw her

outside a quiet little café, nervously playing with her sleeves, all his tiredness fades away. She was shocked, standing still for a moment, like she couldn't believe it. Then her face lit up with a huge smile that made every mile worthy. They grabbed a cozy corner table and shared a small slice of cake, laughing and talking like the world was just the two of them. And somewhere in that hour, between stolen glances and gentle silences, he pulled out a small, folded note from his jacket pocket. Nothing fancy—just his handwriting on old paper. It said: "I don't know if I deserve you. But I want you. In whatever way you'll let me have you." She read it once. Then again. And then whispered, "You already have me." That was all it. No ring. No enormous or huge words. Just two people were deciding that they belonged to each other—even if only for a while, even if only for now. But moments like these don't last. Not when the world is unkind. He had to leave again that evening like always. They never got more than an hour. And that night, when he got home and opened her voice note, she sounded like she was holding back tears. "I wish time would stop when you're here," she said. But it never happened. The visits became rare, but not because they wanted them to be. Life made it hard. Distance wasn't just about roads anymore—it became money, timing, excuses, lies.

Tayer still used to come once in a month, each time waking before dawn, often pretending he wasn't tired. He'd seen her for sixty, maybe seventy minutes. Then he'd to leave, watching her grow smaller in the rearview of a dusty bus's window. They stopped talking about how painful it was. Instead, they talked about silly things—movies, songs, memories they never made together.

Anything to keep it light. Anything to avoid the heaviness driven by sentences while conversations. Fariha's replies started coming slower. Not because she cared any less, but because she was being watched. Her father had started noticing things—too much time on the phone, too many smiles she didn't explain. Her mother asked questions without asking. Her brother once glanced at her screen too long. Then came the evening it broke open. Her father had checked her messages. Everything she feared came crashing down in one loud night. The next morning, she called him from a friend's phone. Her voice was fraying at the edges. "They know," she murmured. "They locked my phone. They yelled. They... hurt me." Tayer didn't speak. He couldn't. His hands trembled. His chest felt hollow. He wanted to scream, to fight, to run to her. But he could do nothing. "I'm okay," she added. But it didn't sound like truth. It sounded like survival. That night, he didn't sleep. He just stared at her last text. "Don't stop waiting for me. Please." They found ways to talk. Fariha borrowed phones, used Wi-Fi late at night when everyone was asleep. Sometimes she'd disappear for two, three days. No messages. No explanation. Each silence carved something out of Tayer. He never blamed her, but he couldn't stop the ache. The uncertainty, the dreadness. When she came back, it was always the same. "I'm sorry." "I missed you." "I wish I were anywhere else but here." Tayer started noticing how her voice had changed. Softer, slower. Like she was tired of fighting, tired of hiding. He asked her once, gently, "Do you want to stop this? If it's hurting you too much..." She replied without thinking. "Losing you would hurt more." Her words should've felt comforting but didn't. It felt like a bruise being kissed. One night,

she sent him a voice note. Her voice was low, broken, like she was speaking from a dark room while holding in sobs. "They took everything. My phone, my books... even the mirror in my room. I'm not even allowed to go out alone anymore. I don't know how long I can keep it up." Tayer listened to that recording ten times. He knew she wasn't asking for help. She never did. But her silence after that message spoke of everything. That night, he searched for plane tickets. To her city. To anywhere far away. No real plan, just a desperate need to reach her before she was lost completely. A week passed without a word. Then two. Tayer texted. Called. Left voice notes that grew shakier each time. "Are you okay?" became "Please say something," which turned into just her name. Over and over. Then finally—one message. "They're shifting me away to another state. My dad has a job there. I don't know if I'll ever have a phone again." He read it in the middle of the night. His chest froze. His mouth went dry. He called her instantly, and to his surprise, she picked up. Just for a minute. The line was full of static. Her voice was thin, scared. "They found out I still talk to you," she whispered. "I don't know how. My father said if I try anything again, he'll do something I won't recover from." Tayer's voice cracked. "Let me see you. Just once. Tell me were. I'll be there." She didn't answer directly. Instead, she said, "I don't think I'll survive this place." Then the line cut. He didn't wait. He packed a bag that night with trembling hands—clothes, charger, a bottle of water, and all the money he had left. His mind didn't stop to think if it was smart. All he knew was that he couldn't let her leave without seeing her one last time. The next morning, he ran to the airport. Not even knowing what flight. What time. When he got

there, the board already showed her city's departure. The plane had already taken off. So, he made a decision. He would go to her. By road. Alone. No matter how far. The distance between cities wasn't just in kilometres but it was the travel of hours without sleep, in aching feet, in cold benches at empty bus stops. Tayer had never travelled alone this far, this blindly. He didn't even know the exact address. Just the name of the state, and that Fariha's family had relatives there. He moved like a boy possessed. He barely ate. He walked when buses didn't show. He sat beside strangers, staring out of dusty windows, thinking of her. Wondering if she was crying. If she was safe. If she was still his. His phone's battery was almost dead halfway through the journey. No charger worked. No messages came. He was cut off now, floating through unfamiliar roads, chasing someone who didn't even know he was coming. By the third day, he hadn't slept in over 30 hours. He hadn't showered. His lips were cracked from the heat, and his eyes were hollow with worry. He kept asking for directions, showing strangers her picture—just in case. Most shrugged. A few looked at him like he was lost in more ways than one. But he didn't stop. One evening, while asking near a tea stall, he was mistaken for someone else—accused of stealing a phone. Before he could explain, hands grabbed him, pushed him down. He was beaten hard. Boots, fists, anger that wasn't even meant for him. They beat him until his face bled, until his vision blurred. His voice broke into useless cries. He lay on the roadside, shivering, bleeding, whispering her name like a prayer. "Fariha... Fariha... I came... I'm still coming..." But there was no answer. Just the sound of the wind, and a sky that didn't care. Tayer woke up in a

clinic bed two towns away. Some kind stranger had found him lying unconscious on the roadside and brought him in. He didn't ask questions—just got stitched, swallowed painkillers, and left as soon as he could stand. His face was swollen, lips split, purple eyes. But his legs still worked, and that was enough. He resumed the journey. Each step was slower now, more broken. His body screamed for rest, but his heart was louder. All he wanted was to see her once—just once. To look her in the eyes and let her know he came. That he kept his promise. He finally reached the city four days after she'd left. He had no address. Just the rough name of an area she once mentioned in a call. He wandered the streets like a ghost. Stopping every girl with a resemblance. Knocking on random gates. Showing her picture. Begging for a sliver of truth. No one knew her. And then, one evening, as the sky dimmed to a cold Gray, a woman at a small grocery store paused when he said her name. "Fariha?" she repeated, eyes narrowing. "The quiet girl? She doesn't come outside. Her father doesn't let her come out. Something's wrong with her now." He didn't understand at first. Until the woman leaned in and whispered, "She talks to herself. Screams at night. Doesn't eat. Like her mind's gone somewhere else. Some say she's mad now." The words didn't land. Not right away. But slowly, they carved into him. Mad. Gone. His hands went numb. His mouth tasted blood again—not from injury, but from the hurt rising inside his chest like a wave he couldn't hold back. He had come all this way. And maybe... he had already lost her.

Tayer found the house two days later. A modest, pale building at the end of a silent street. Curtains always drawn. Garden dead. It

seemed like a place where sound wasn't welcome. He waited until dusk before approaching. His breath shallow. His heart heavy. He didn't knock. He stood across the street, hidden behind a broken fence, and waited. Hours passed. Night deepened. And then, the window on the second floor shifted. A curtain moved. And for a moment—just a moment—he saw her. Fariha. Her hair was messier. Her eyes were wide, unfocused. She sat on the floor, swaying gently. Talking to no one. Smiling at nothing. Her lips moved like she was whispering a name. His name. Tayer's legs gave out. He sat on the pavement, too numb to cry. This wasn't how he imagined it. He thought she'd run to him. That he'd lift her out of this cage and they'd leave it all behind. But she was already gone. Her body was here. Her face, still beautiful in the windowlight. But her mind... it had drowned. Drowned in all the silence, the beatings, the waiting. In all the love that never got to grow. He didn't try to meet her. He didn't shout or fight or knock. He just sat there. And watched her fade behind the curtain again. When the night got too cold, he stood up and left. Not because he wanted to. But because there was nothing left to save. Nothing left of the girl he had loved more than life. He didn't go home. There was no "home" anymore. Just a room he couldn't return to, memories he couldn't live with, and a body too hollow to carry the pain any further. For two nights, he stayed near the station. Alone. He sat beside vending machines, walked roads without names, stared at the sky as if it owed him answers. But nothing came. No voice. No sign. No hand to hold. He thought of calling someone. A friend. Anyone. But what would he even say? "The girl I loved lost her mind. And I lost mine with her." On the third night, he found an old, rusting overpass on the edge of the city. It overlooked empty train tracks and a river that barely moved. No

lights. No cameras. No one watching. He stood at the edge for a long time. Wind pressed against his face, soft and cruel. His injuries still ached, his ribs felt cracked, but none of it compared to the hollowness inside. He whispered her name one last time. Just once. "Fariha." It didn't echo. There was no dramatic letter. No tears left. Just silence. And then, he stepped forward. The world didn't shake. The skies didn't scream. It was quiet. And that's how it ended. One boy who loved too deeply. One girl who broke without him. And a love story that died in places even the heart couldn't reach. She was alive, but not here. And he was here, but not alive.

About Tawheed Faraz

Tawheed a 20-year-old aspiring writer from the scenic valley of Ganderbal, Kashmir, is a passionate storyteller balancing his academic journey with creative pursuits. Currently preparing for NEET, he discovered his love for writing through the influence of a close friend, an Urdu poet whose art sparked Tawheed's own literary path. Though he began writing only a year ago, his dedication and natural flair for expression have already led him to craft a compelling novella, which he proudly considers his best work to date. With a heart rooted in Kashmir's beauty and a mind driven by imagination, Tawheed continues to shape his voice as a writer, aspiring to share stories that resonate deeply with readers.

The Beetle Who Became a Girl

By Irtiza

The Beetle Who Became a Girl lived in the rusted veins of 1885 India, tucked deep in a slum that smelled of rot and rain. The streets were narrow and cracked, the houses coughed smoke, and silence was the rarest currency of all. Amid this chaotic sprawl lived a beetle. Small, dark, unimportant—the kind of thing people crushed without noticing. It spent its life crawling between broken bricks and discarded scraps, dodging filth and feet. But this beetle had something no other creature of its kind possessed. It had awareness. It had been watching humans—their lives, their freedom, how they laughed and wept, how they built and destroyed, how they hurt and healed, how they wrote letters and then set them a flame. At night, these humans looked to the moon as if it were listening. They felt so much and so deeply, and in its quiet crawling life, the beetle longed to feel the same. “I don’t want to live like this,” it whispered one night into the dirt. “I want more. I want to walk on two legs and breathe with lungs that ache. I want to speak and be heard. I want a story, not just survival. I want to know what it means to be alive.” Somewhere in the great architecture of the universe, that wish—absurd yet desperate—was granted. Far away, in a cold valley choked by fog, lived a girl. She was twenty but moved like someone three lifetimes older. She lived in a house that drained the light from her eyes. Her family

did not scream; they eroded her quietly with passive comments, with the kind of silence that made her question whether she mattered at all. Her world was a fog of expectations and disappointments, each breath heavier than the last. She did not want to die—not really—but she no longer remembered how it felt to want to live. She had dreams once: a notebook filled with sketches, a journal of plans. Now they sat in a box under her bed, gathering dust. Then, one night, something inside her vanished. No one noticed. Not even her. And in that silence, the beetle arrived. It did not crash in with thunder or light. It simply was. The beetle now lived in a girl's body. It blinked with human eyes. It breathed with a chest that trembled from memories it had not made. And it awoke to a storm of pain, emptiness, and the echo of a hundred heartbreaks. The beetle staggered. This was not the beautiful human life it had dreamed of. This was confusion, weight, mornings filled with nothing. The beetle, who once feared boots and gutters, now feared mirrors. It inherited every emotion the girl had ever felt—and that was loneliness, shame, worthlessness. It walked in her body, bleeding through her skin. Yet even in the wreckage, the beetle found something. A note scribbled in a journal, barely legible: "I want to live a life that is worth something. I want to make it somewhere beautiful when it ends. But right now, I am so far from that. I am broken. I do not even know how to try anymore." That was all—one whisper from a fading soul. And that was enough. That was the beginning.

The beetle, the soul of something once crushed and insignificant, had been given the wheel of a collapsing human life. It could have run. It could have numbed itself. It could have wasted the body

and disappeared into the fog, just as she had. But instead, it made a decision. It would carry the girl forward. Not as her, but for her. Every day, it dragged the body out of bed. Every day, it chose food instead of starvation, words instead of silence, breath instead of surrender. It stitched her pieces back together—not to erase her, but to continue her. The beetle had wanted beauty but had found brokenness. And in that brokenness, it discovered power—a different kind of beauty, a human kind. And so, the beetle lived, day by day. Learning how to cry. Learning how to scream into pillows. Learning how to make tea and how to read poetry, how to shake from panic and still rise again. It learned to take long walks with headphones in, pretending the music could drown out the ache. It learned to rest, to fall, to speak kindly to a reflection that did not yet feel like home. And somewhere along the way, it learned to love being alive. Not because it was easy, but because it meant something. To feel and still move forward. To ache and still choose joy. To shatter and still stand again. That was more powerful than anything the beetle had imagined. And one day, the story will be finished. When the girl's body grows old and her bones return to dust, the beetle will be gone too. But before that happens, it will leave behind a note, written in the girl's old notebook and tucked gently under her pillow: "I was not born into this life. I crawled into it humbly from the dirt. I was once small, insignificant, unseen. But I was given the rarest gift—a second chance. And I chose to carry her story with honour. And I chose to rise and to walk. Not perfectly, but purposefully." This was the story written by the beetle.

About Irtiza

My name is Irtiza, and I am from Srinagar. I am a student pursuing a B.Sc. in Zoology. Writing began as a hobby and soon became a way for me to express myself and give shape to my thoughts. It helps me feel more connected to who i am and allows me to share my imagination with others.

The Puppeteer's Strings

Story By Irtiza

There was once a girl who never felt enough. When she walked through the marketplace, her eyes darted toward the confident ones—the ones who laughed without hesitation, who spoke without stumbling, who moved as if the ground itself had been laid out for them. She compared herself endlessly, until her thoughts were like broken glass, cutting her from within. She read books and listened to voices that promised transformation. Do this, and you'll shine. Think this, and you'll be loved. Try harder, try again. But no matter how many times she followed their rules, her reflection in the eyes of others never matched what she longed for. Then one evening, as the marketplace was folding into shadows, she heard music unlike anything she'd ever known. It came from a tent draped in silks and lanterns, glowing like a secret star. Inside, a tall figure in a coat of stitched velvet greeted her—the Puppeteer. His eyes gleamed like polished wood, and from his fingers hung dozens of shimmering strings, glowing as though woven from moonlight. "Each thread," he said, his voice as smooth as oil, "is a gift. Attach one, and you will move more gracefully. Attach two, and people will admire you. Attach more, and you will never again feel small." The girl hesitated, but the longing inside her was louder than caution. She let him tie the first string to her wrist. It tingled with warmth, pulling her arm into a

poised arc. Her hand moved with elegance, her body straightened, her voice smoothed. People in the tent clapped. She blushed, half in fear, half in wonder. She left the tent lighter, brighter. For the first time in years, eyes followed her with admiration. It was intoxicating.

The next day she returned. This time, she asked for more strings. The Puppeteer smiled knowingly. Soon her ankles, her shoulders, her spine, even her smile were tied. Everywhere she went, people applauded the way she carried herself. Compliments rained on her like confetti. She was becoming everything she thought she wanted to be. But at night, when she tried to sleep, the strings tugged. She could not curl into her bed, could not sigh freely, could not even weep. Her movements were beautiful, yes—but they were no longer hers. Weeks passed. She grew tired, but every morning, she woke and performed. At times she whispered, *I feel like a doll.* The Puppeteer only tightened her strings, whispering, “Perfection has its price.” One day, she passed by a group of children playing in the street. They stumbled, laughed, scraped their knees, and kept running. Their joy was clumsy, uneven, unchoreographed. She stopped to watch. Something inside her chest ached—a memory of being small and careless and alive. A child turned to her and said, “Why don’t you play?” She tried to step forward, but the strings yanked her back. Her body posed instead of leaping, smiled instead of laughing. The children giggled. “You move funny,” one said. And in their innocent laughter, she heard the truth: her grace was hollow. That night, alone in her room, she stood before a mirror. The girl looking back was flawless: perfect posture, perfect smile, perfect mask. But her eyes were empty.

With trembling hands, she reached for the first string and tugged. Pain seared through her arm—it felt like peeling away part of her own skin. She gasped, but then her arm fell limp, heavy, real. She laughed through tears. She pulled another string, and another, each release raw but liberating. By the time dawn arrived, she stood unstrung. Her body was imperfect again, her movements uneven, but every breath was her own. When she returned to the marketplace, no one clapped. No one admired her. But when she smiled—crooked, genuine—she felt warmth rise from within, not from the eyes of others. The Puppeteer saw her from across the square. He raised his brow as though to say, you'll come crawling back. But she shook her head. For the first time, she understood: perfection was a prison, and freedom was found in being flawed, alive, and real. And so, she walked on, unstrung, into her own imperfect future.

The Date of Birth

Story by: Salika Wani

I stood in a hospital corridor, but the walls pulsed faintly, as if they were made of skin rather than plaster. The lights above flickered in rhythm with a heartbeat I couldn't hear, yet could feel deep within my chest. Every door was numbered, but the numbers weren't ordinary, they were dates. Some far in the past, others far in the future. I opened one at random. Inside was a small, white room where an old woman sat on the bed. She looked exactly like me, only her face was blurred, as if erased from memory. She whispered:

"When you wake, I'll be gone."

The moment I stepped back, the door slammed, and the numbers on all the doors began to change, rolling like slot machines, until they all landed on the same date: the day I was born. I was dragged inside by invisible hands. The room wasn't white anymore; it was filled with bassinets, hundreds of them, each holding an infant that looked like me. But none of them cried. They only stared with open eyes, black and glassy, their tiny mouths moving as if practicing speech. One by one, they turned their heads toward me in perfect unison. Then they spoke together, in my voice, my exact voice: "We were never supposed to grow up." Suddenly, the bassinets tipped, spilling the babies onto the floor. But they didn't crawl toward me. Instead, they began to merge, their skin knitting

together like clay pressed into a single mass. Their bodies fused until they became one gigantic infant, faceless, smooth, and unbroken. It reached for me with swollen, fingerless arms. As it touched me, I felt my own face melting away, as if it were made of wax. I tried to scream, but without a mouth, all that escaped was a wet, smothered cry, like the desperate wail of a newborn. And then, I woke up.

About already mentioned in previous stories.

Winter's Night of fear

BY Anonymous Narrator

When my university holidays began, I returned to my hometown. It was the peak of winter, and the entire valley was covered with snow. The white blanket stretched across the fields, the rooftops, and the narrow lanes, almost one foot deep in some places. The air was sharp and cold, and each breath seemed to carry a trace of ice. This was the atmosphere in which I arrived home, happy to be free from studies for a while, eager to spend some days in the comfort of my family's company.

It had always been my routine that whenever I returned home from the university, I would also visit my cousin. We were not just cousins but also classmates, and since we were of the same age, we shared a strong bond. Every vacation, we would spend long hours talking, laughing, and sometimes even studying together. Naturally, when I came home this time, I had already thought about meeting him in the coming days.

Two days after reaching home, something unusual happened. It was late at night almost one o'clock when my phone suddenly rang. At that hour, when the world outside was completely silent and wrapped in darkness, the ringing of the phone startled me. My heart skipped a beat, and like anyone else, I felt a wave of fear. I wondered who could be calling at such a time. With trembling

hands, I picked up the phone, only to discover that it was my cousin.

When I answered, his voice sounded strange. He was trying to speak in a normal tone, but I could sense that something was wrong. He was frightened, though he was attempting to hide it. I asked him, “Why are you calling me so late? Is there some emergency?” For a few moments, he did not speak at all. The silence on the other end made me even more nervous. Finally, I pressed him again, “Come on, speak. Don’t keep me in suspense, or else I’ll call your house directly.” At this, he finally admitted that he was scared.

He explained that usually his elder brother shared the room with him, but that night his brother had gone to attend a friend’s event and was staying there. Left alone in the room, he had decided to use the time for studying. While reading, however, he dozed off for a short while. Suddenly, he was awakened by a loud thud on his window, as if someone had pushed it forcefully. He jumped up and rushed to check, but found nothing outside. Since then, he had been too terrified to sit alone, and to make matters worse, the electricity had gone out, leaving his room in darkness.

To calm him down, I immediately made a video call. I could see that he was still shaken, so I tried to reassure him. I told him to recite verses of protection and reminded him that nothing would happen if he placed his trust in God. For nearly two hours, I stayed on the call with him, talking and distracting him until finally the electricity returned. Once the light was back, he felt safer and eventually managed to fall asleep.

The next morning, I made up my mind to visit him in person. After taking permission from my family, I went to his house. During the day, things seemed completely normal. We sat together, talked about different topics, and even laughed about ordinary things. But eventually, the previous night's incident came up again. I asked him to tell me everything in detail. Once again, he repeated how the window had shaken violently and how the sudden darkness had amplified his fear.

I wanted him to overcome this fear, so I suggested that we should spend the night in his room again, especially since his brother was still not home. At first, he hesitated and refused, saying he did not want to face that experience again. But I convinced him by explaining that perhaps it had only been the wind that moved the window, and the absence of light made it appear more terrifying. After much persuasion, he agreed.

That evening, we settled in his room. As was our habit, we chatted late into the night. Once again, the power went out. My cousin grew restless, but I tried to keep him calm by saying the lights would soon return. But before long, the same strange event repeated itself. Something hit the window this time it sounded like a stone. Both of us froze. My cousin's face went pale, and even I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the winter outside.

Trying to be brave, I told him, "We cannot let this go on forever. If we don't find out the cause, it will happen again and again. Let's go and see who is behind this." We cautiously went down the stairs together. The living room downstairs had a small tree outside the window. In the dim light, it seemed as though someone

was sitting there. The sight sent a surge of terror through us, and without daring to investigate further, we rushed back upstairs. That night, even I could not dismiss the fear. Something was definitely happening.

The next morning at breakfast, we shared everything with his family. However, they brushed it off, saying it must have been our imagination. His grandfather, in particular, laughed gently and said, "What you saw near the tree was not a person. I had hung my long coat there. Since it was dark, you mistook it for a figure."

After breakfast, we went to the living room and checked. Indeed, the coat was hanging there. I felt a wave of relief wash over me. It seemed everything had been nothing more than a misunderstanding. But my cousin was not satisfied. He whispered to me later, "No, there's something more to this. I can feel it."

That night, I decided to stay again. This time, his brother was also home, though he slept on the first floor while we remained in the same room as before. We wanted to see if the strange events would repeat themselves. For hours, we waited. Then, as if on cue, the electricity failed again but this time only in our room. The rest of the house was still lit. The strangeness of it made my blood run cold.

From the staircase, we began hearing the sound of footsteps, slow and deliberate, as if someone was climbing or descending. The window began to move again, not violently this time but in a steady, eerie rhythm. My cousin clutched my arm, his fear almost overwhelming him. I too felt the weight of terror pressing down on me. We called his elder brother, who tried to calm us, saying it must be our imagination, worsened by late-night conversations

and watching too many films. But the noises were real, and they were happening right then.

Determined not to panic, we tried to show some courage. We decided not to wake the rest of the household. Instead, we put in earphones, played some recitations, and lay down, hoping to ignore whatever was happening. Just when we thought things were quieting down, the window slammed open and shut with a violent force. Both of us leapt up, reciting prayers in fear. This continued until nearly three in the morning. Then, as dawn approached and the call for the Fajr prayer echoed through the air, everything suddenly became normal again.

Exhausted, we fell asleep. By the time we woke up, the sun was already high. When questioned about why we had risen so late, we narrated the entire night's events to his family once again. This time, they could see the seriousness in our voices. They finally believed us and decided to consult a spiritual healer.

Soon after, I returned to my own home. A few days later, I called my cousin to ask what happened. He told me that the healer had visited, recited certain verses in the room, and spoken privately to the family. Afterwards, his belongings were shifted from that room to another on the first floor.

I pressed him for details, but he said the family had not shared exactly what the healer had told them. They only said it was better not to use that room anymore. From that day until now, whenever I visit their house, we never sleep in that hall upstairs. At night, we always stay on the first floor. What truly happened in that room, we may never know. The mystery remains unsolved, lingering in our memories like a shadow that refuses to fade.

Between the edge of dream and reality

By Mustakeen Mushtaq [Author]

It was during those days when I was working on my fictional anthology project. Nights had become longer than usual, and I would sit with my papers, notes, and laptop, trying to give shape to my imagination. That night was no different. I had been awake for hours, lost in writing, until sleep slowly began to creep over me. My eyelids felt heavy, and though I wanted to continue working, my body demanded rest.

My friend was there in the room with me. He wasn't involved in my project but was busy doing his own work. The two of us often sat together like that—each of us occupied with something different, yet sharing the silence of the night.

At one point, my throat went dry. I felt an unusual thirst, but I was too tired to get up. I looked at my friend and said,

“Brother, can you get me some water? I'm really thirsty and I don't think I can stand up right now.”

He looked up briefly, nodded, and then walked out of the room. I expected him to return quickly, but time kept passing, and he didn't come back. I waited, growing restless, and finally decided to call him on the phone. The first time I called, he didn't answer. That annoyed me a little. I tried again, and this time he picked up.

“Where are you? I'm thirsty. Bring the water,” I said impatiently.

“I’m coming in two minutes,” he replied calmly.

I hung up, reassured, but minutes turned into more minutes. He still didn’t appear. My irritation grew stronger. I called him again, this time with anger in my voice.

“Where are you? How long does it take to bring water?”

“I’m coming, I’m walking back. Just wait,” he said again.

But the same story repeated itself. He didn’t come. My patience ended. I felt both angry and curious. Finally, I decided not to call him again. Instead, I got up myself and walked outside.

The corridor was silent. Everything seemed strangely still. Right next to my room, there was another room. I thought perhaps I could get water from there, and maybe I would also find my friend.

I knocked on the door. It swung open easily it hadn’t been locked. The lights inside were on, and to my shock, I saw my friend sitting in that room. Not only was he there, but he was in the middle of a heated argument with someone.

My anger flared up. I had been waiting all this time, parched with thirst, while he was sitting there wasting time in an argument? I felt betrayed. Without thinking, I scolded him harshly.

“Are you serious? I’ve been calling you again and again for water, and here you are arguing? Do you even care?”

Without waiting for his answer, I grabbed a bottle of water from the room. Then, out of sheer frustration, I slammed the door shut with such force that the walls echoed. Holding the bottle tightly, I stormed back to my room.

But what happened next froze me.

As soon as I entered my room, I saw my friend sitting there—calm, as if he had never left. He looked at me and said,

“I’ve been here the whole time. I didn’t even pick up your calls. Where did you go?”

My head spun. My anger was instantly replaced by confusion. I had just seen him in the other room, arguing loudly. I had just shouted at him, slammed the door, and even taken a bottle from there. And now here he was, claiming he never left my side.

I stared at him, my heart racing.

“That can’t be true,” I insisted. “I just saw you in the next room. You were fighting with someone. Don’t lie.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about? I didn’t go anywhere. Look, here’s the bottle of water I brought. You asked for it earlier.”

I looked at his hands. Yes there was a bottle of water in them. But then what about the bottle I had picked up from the other room? Where had it gone? My throat went dry again, but not from thirst from fear.

I looked straight into his eyes. He looked back at me, equally confused. For a moment, it felt like both of us were questioning reality itself.

And then, just as my heart began to pound harder, I woke up.

I was lying on my bed. My papers and notes were scattered around. It had all been a dream. The thirst, the waiting, the shouting, the slamming of the door none of it had really happened.

I had dozed off while working on my project, and my mind had created that strange scene.

But the dream was so vivid, so lifelike, that even after waking up, I couldn't shake it off. It clung to my mind like a shadow.

When I finally stood up to stretch my body, I heard voices coming from outside. Out of curiosity, I stepped into the corridor. And what I saw shocked me again my friend really was in the next room, arguing with someone, exactly like in my dream.

For a moment, I froze. My feet felt heavy, and my breath caught in my throat. Was I still dreaming? Or was this reality?

Slowly, I walked toward the room. The voices grew louder. My friend's words were sharp, his tone heated, just as I had imagined earlier. And when he finally returned to our room, he had a bottle of water in his hands—the same detail that had unsettled me in my dream.

I could not hold back anymore. "Listen," I told him, "I need to tell you something. You won't believe me, but I saw all of this already. I saw you arguing in that room, holding the same bottle of water. But I saw it in a dream, while I was asleep."

He stopped and looked at me with wide eyes. For a moment, he was speechless. "Are you serious?" he asked.

"Yes," I said firmly. "It was exactly the same. The argument, the bottle, everything. And now it's happening in real life. How is that even possible?"

My friend was stunned. He sat down, still holding the bottle, and tried to process what I had told him. We talked for a long time,

exchanging theories, laughing nervously, and trying to lighten the mood. But deep down, we both felt the weight of what had happened.

Later that night, as we lay down to sleep, I thought about the dream again. I thought about the strange overlap between imagination and reality, between dreams and waking life. It wasn't just a coincidence—it felt like something more. Maybe it was my tired brain playing tricks, maybe it was fate, or maybe it was just a mysterious side of human consciousness that I couldn't explain.

Even as the days passed, I couldn't forget that night. The memory stayed with me, carved deep into my mind. Every time I looked at my friend, every time I picked up a bottle of water, the thought came back: What was real, and what was only in my mind?

That incident became more than just a dream. It became a story—one that blurred the line between reality and imagination. And that's why I, Mustakeen Mushtaq, decided to record it. It became part of my anthology, not just as a tale of thirst or anger, but as an exploration of the mysteries of the human mind.

Because sometimes, dreams don't just stay inside our sleep. Sometimes, they spill into reality, leaving us forever uncertain about the world we think we know.

Fragile Thread of Hope.

By Haroon Mehraj

In a dream, I was standing at the edge of a quiet river. The water did not flow forward; instead, it moved in slow circles, as though trapped in its own confusion. The air was heavy, but strangely calm, and above me, the moon looked too close, hanging low like it might fall into the water at any moment.

Across the river, I saw a faint light. It flickered the way a candle does in the wind. Something in me whispered to follow it. There was no bridge, yet when I stepped onto the water, it held me. I walked across carefully, feeling every ripple shift beneath my feet, as if the river was alive and watching me.

When I reached the other side, the light disappeared. Instead, I found a path of broken lanterns, each one glowing dimly for only a second when I came near. It felt like they were guiding me, but also testing me, as if asking:

[Will you keep walking even when the light is this weak]?

The path led me to an old house. It looked familiar, though I was sure I had never seen it before. The windows were open, the curtains moved though there was no wind. As I stepped inside, the walls whispered in voices I almost recognized. Some were gentle, calling me by name, others were sharp, warning me not to stay.

In the center of the room, there was a chair. Hanging from it was a single thread, glowing faintly, stretched across the darkness and vanishing into a doorway with no door. I felt it pulling me, fragile yet unbreakable. I followed.

The thread led me into endless corridors where clocks ticked without faces, and mirrors showed not my reflection, but people I once loved smiling, crying, reaching out. Every mirror shattered as I passed, but the thread kept glowing, guiding me forward.

Finally, I reached the end: a small, empty room. On the floor lay a younger version of me, curled up like a child, holding the other end of the glowing thread. When I touched it, the child looked at me with eyes full of sorrow and whispered:

“[This is the last piece of hope you carry].

[Protect it, or everything will fall apart].”

Before I could reply, the thread snapped like glass breaking. The house collapsed into dust, the river roared back into a flood, and I woke up breathless, with the strange feeling that I had just lost something important, yet still carried a tiny spark of it inside me.