

*Ours,
Somehow*
stories from everyday life

APRYL



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Introduction

Life rarely unfolds in grand gestures. More often, it reveals itself in small, unspoken moments. These fragments, fleeting as they may seem, carry the stories of who we are and what we become.

Ours, Somehow is a collection of eleven such stories. They are about ordinary people, caught in the push and pull of everyday life, love and longing, chance and missed opportunities, the tenderness of belonging and the ache of solitude. Nothing extraordinary, and yet, everything essential.

I didn't set out to write about grand adventures or larger-than-life heroes. I wrote about what lingers, the conversations that stay unfinished, the emotions we pack away, the quiet lessons we learn when no one is watching.

Each story is different, yet they are bound by an invisible thread: the search for meaning in the everyday. They belong to you as much as they belong to me. Perhaps that's why I chose to call this book *Ours, Somehow*.

This book wouldn't have been possible without my family, their patience, encouragement, and love have been my anchor. To my husband, who has been my steady support and biggest believer. To my daughter, who reminds me every day of wonder and curiosity. And to my parents and sister, who gave me the courage to dream and the strength to follow through. I owe it all to you, my family.

May these stories find you where you are, and remind you that life's quietest moments are often its most profound.

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The Bag that Carried more than Stuff

My olive-green tote bag. The silent witness to my unfolding. If I were to recount the story of my life, it wouldn't be through the voices of people, but through the faded threads of that bag. It has been with me longer than most people have. It has seen versions of me no one else has: the traveler, the dreamer, the broken, the hopeful.

I didn't name it, but if I had to, I'd call it *Precious*. Because that's what it has been to me. Not just something to carry my belongings, but something that carried *me* when life got too heavy.

I remember once looking at it, sitting quietly in the corner of my room, slouched but not defeated. There was something deeply human about its tiredness, its uncomplaining stance. Like a person you lean on too often, who never asks for anything back.

It has seen more of the world than most of the people around me, which is why it is more empathetic than most people I've met. And maybe that's why it never judged me when I filled it with more weight than it should have carried. Like me, it never complained. Like me, it simply held on.

How we met is a story tangled in dust, street noise, and accidental wisdom.

It was a sunlit afternoon in Sarojini Nagar, Delhi, the street shopper's paradise. The kind of day where the sun touches every metal button and glinting earring hanging from a vendor's cart. My sister and I were there for a casual spree, walking through cramped lanes filled with colors, sounds, and the tempting smell of *momos* and the rumbling sound of *Banta-walas*.

A man blocked our path as we entered. He was selling bags and had a cheeky grin.

"How are you going to shop when you're not carrying a shopping bag?" he asked.

We laughed him off. It felt like a random sales line, but as we walked deeper into the market, trying to juggle clothes and accessories in our hands, his words came back not just as logic, but as a metaphor.

How will you achieve anything in life when you don't know what you want from life? How do you succeed in life if you're not prepared for it?

We turned back. Not to him, but to another vendor who had larger bags. Nothing felt right. Too flimsy. Too shiny. Too branded. Too basic. We were on the verge of giving up when the original vendor returned, confidently claiming, "These are my customers."

I was embarrassed. But then I saw *him*.

He handed the olive-green tote. Not the color I usually go for; I'd never owned a thing in that shade. But something about it called to me. It was sturdy, quiet in its

appearance, with the name of a big sports brand plastered across the front.

My logical mind resisted. But my heart, my reckless, emotional heart, had already decided. My heart had already whispered yes.

100 INR. That's what it cost. A hundred rupees for what turned out to be a seven-year relationship that would teach me more than most friendships.

You can't and shouldn't judge value by monetary standards.

My tote traveled with me through every phase that truly mattered. It came with me on solo trips across India. It carried my books when I was preparing for exams. It held lunchboxes, notebooks, toiletries, unfinished journals, half-read novels, and all the emotional debris that comes with being a growing woman in a changing world. It didn't just carry things. It **carried my life**.

Notebooks filled with unfinished poems. Passport covers that held the scent of escape. Random coins. Crumpled tissues. Hope. Regret. Love. It took them all, without asking for a receipt or a reason.

It was there when I left my first job, heart pounding and dreams bruised. It carried my resignation letter, tucked beside a half-eaten chocolate bar. It sat beside me on park benches, during lonely evenings, when I needed air more than I needed people.

I've cried into its canvas exterior more than once. It soaked up silent tears during flights home, relationship traumas, and random existential crises. And yet, it never betrayed a sign of weariness.

Sometimes, I imagine it has memories. Like how it must remember the red *kurti* I stuffed into it hastily after a friend's wedding. Or the hotel toiletries I snuck in, amused by my own thrill-seeking in tiny rebellions. Or the carefully wrapped gifts I bought for my parents when I first traveled abroad.

Yet no one knew about it in my circle. One day, I felt like I was cheating on him. Keeping my relationship private. On my easy days, I would carry a designer bag to the office. It accompanied me on days I needed an extra hand. He was like an old friend with whom you are not in contact in general, but whenever life is hard, you look out for them.

It hit me one day: I am so much like my tote.

And as it carried me through time, I became like it.

Like my tote, I held space for others for their heartbreaks, their secrets, their emotional overflow. I became a silent vessel, full of things that didn't belong to me, but that I couldn't say no to.

I hold everything—the useful, the random, the broken. Even when I feel I can't anymore, I still do. I accommodate. I adjust. I stretch beyond capacity. And no one knows the real me.

And even when I am brimming, when my insides are in chaos, I make sure I appear calm. Tidy. Reliable. Just like my olive-green tote.

There were times I resented this quality in myself and the tote. The inability to say no. The persistent urge to help, to hold, to be the dependable one. But over time, I began to honor it.

Growing up with modest roots, I didn't have a lot, but I had dreams. And the tote was always with me as I chased them, quietly cheering me on.

And then came the day I saw it —the small hole.

Years passed, and the olive green began to fade. A small hole appeared at the base, unnoticeable at first, like the way depression settles softly before it fully arrives. The stitching had started to come undone. I panicked. It was just a bag. But it wasn't.

No one saw the wear and tear. From afar, I looked fine. Functional. But inside, things were falling apart. At the base, inside, barely visible unless you looked closely. A tiny tear that had likely been growing for a while. Isn't that how it always is? The real damage is never loud. It builds slowly, silently.

It caught me off guard. My chest tightened.

"The wound is the place where the Light enters you."

—Rumi

I felt like I was looking at my own soul.

Because that hole symbolized me, the **leak in my emotional base**, the slow loss of what held me together. I wasn't just tired. I was **worn**. But I smiled anyway, like my tote, holding more than I should, pretending it was light.

Years of holding pain, of shouldering burdens, of not being able to say, "This is too much," had all taken its toll. Not just on the tote, but on me.

I was exhausted. But I'd become so good at carrying things, emotional luggage, others' problems, even guilt, that I didn't know how to stop.

And like that small hole, I had parts of me leaking. Joy. Kindness. Laughter. Dreams. Even courage, at times. Things that once defined me.

I realized I had become someone people came to only when they needed space. To vent. To cry. To store their own chaos. And I'd let them. Willingly. Even happily.

But when I looked back, the chair in front of me was empty, and I was often left alone to cry in the bathroom or on pillows. I never got the support of any shoulder when I needed it.

Though my bag was also on my shoulder but it was not me who was carrying him; rather, I was walking with its support.

I thought about letting go.

About replacing the bag. Buying something new, something shinier. But every time I picked up a new bag at a store, I felt guilty, like I was betraying a friend, or rather, my companion.

That's when it occurred to me: why do we always replace things when they're broken? Why is repair not our first instinct? Why, when there is sourness in our relationships, we move away rather than trying to make it work?

I decided to mend the bag.

I bought a needle and strong thread. I stitched the scar myself. Every loop was meditative, like I was sewing myself back together, one tug at a time. I wasn't perfect at it. The stitches were uneven. But they were mine. That day, I got to know the boundaries of love: it's infinite. You learn things you never expected to learn for love.

In caring for the bag, I began to care for myself. I began loving myself again.

I learned to say no. To not carry every burden handed to me. To acknowledge when I needed support. To choose my own struggle. To turn the bow toward the unknown and never look back with remorse or regret.

I reduced what I carried both physically and emotionally. Not everything had to fit. Not everything had to be held.

My tote and I are older now. The green is fading. The fabric is softer. The scars are visible if you look closely.

Once damage is done, whether to the body or the mind, it leaves a mark that time may soften but never fully erase. Physical wounds may heal, scars fading into skin, but the memory of pain lingers in muscle and bone. Mental wounds run deeper still, often invisible, yet shaping thoughts, fears, and futures. Words once spoken, betrayals once made, and traumas once endured can't be undone; they become part of the person who survives them. Healing is possible, yes, but the damage reshapes the landscape; it doesn't restore it to what it once was.

Though now I am in love with the new me and my faded bag, in that new shape, in the strength born from survival, I find something beautiful.

We're still here. Still walking. Still traveling.

There are days I think about letting it go, donating it. But every time I try, a voice inside resists.

We are not done.

We still have dreams to chase, stories to write, sunsets to witness, and laughter to share. And maybe, just maybe,

our scars are what make us beautiful. And prepare us for this world.

Others might not understand the scarred version of you.

Some people, when faced with things that look imperfect or worn, will throw them away, be it a torn bag, a broken routine, or even a version of a person they can't quite understand. But what they fail to see is the beauty in resilience. They miss the evolution, the quiet strength that builds layer by layer after every setback. And that's okay because this isn't their journey. It's mine.

So, I kept it.

Now, that same bag belongs to my daughter. She carries it with pride to her swimming classes, slinging it over her shoulder like it's just another part of her daily adventure. She doesn't see the small scars it carries, the slightly faded fabric, or the stitches I once added in quiet determination. All she knows is that it fits everything she needs, keeps things dry, and never lets the weeping mark show. And in that way, it has become more than just a bag; it has become a quiet symbol of trust, strength, and continuity.

That bag is a symbol; I am with her always and forever. Who else can I trust more than my *Precious* to carry on my life!

There's something incredibly full circle about watching my daughter carry it now. As a woman, I've come to understand that we often hold more than we show. We carry the unseen weights of expectations, setbacks, grief, joy, growth all tucked neatly beneath the surface, hidden in tidy seams. Much like that bag, we learn to adapt, to grow,

to hold more than we ever thought possible. And in doing so, we become more: more than the pain we endured, more than the roles we were told to play, more than what anyone else can see from the outside.

As a woman, and now as a mother, I've learned that we don't have to look perfect to be dependable, to be loved, or to carry something meaningful. That old, olive-green tote bag, now passed on to my daughter, is a reminder that even things once seen as worn out can rise to new purposes. It's grown into a much more meaningful and responsible role, just like I have.

I may not be the same woman I once was. I've weathered my own share of losses, lessons, and quiet transformations. But now, watching my daughter grow and trust in something I once relied on, I feel a quiet pride. Because in the end, it's not about perfection, it's about purpose. And in this chapter of life, I'm choosing to honor that purpose, to embrace the journey, and to love the stronger, wiser woman I've become.

No more together, but we walk on, not empty, not perfect, but...

Full of hope.

Where the Waves Meet the Soul

I was seamlessly balancing my home and career with an open heart and a determined spirit. My day begins early, preparing breakfast with a smile, ensuring my child is ready for school, and sharing a warm cup of coffee with my husband. Together, we weave a bond of support and understanding, making our house a cozy, heavenly home filled with laughter and love.

I always dress elegantly yet practically, often choosing a crisp cotton kurta paired with tailored trousers or a smart blouse with comfortable jeans. My attire speaks of my dynamic life: soft pastels or vibrant prints, simple jewelry, and a smart watch adorning my wrist, informing all the updates of the world and reminding me about my own life. I always move with confidence, I am a blend of tradition and modernity, my hair is always neatly tied or left flowing, adding to my signature style.

At work, I am focused and professional, carrying the same compassion and organization from my home into my career. I always handle meetings, deadlines, and challenges with a calm, solution-driven mindset. Back home, the scene is warm and lively, my husband often helping with dinner, my girls sharing school stories at the dining table, the sound of laughter filling the rooms. The household chores are shared with love, not burden; tasks become moments of

connection, whether it's folding laundry together or setting the table.

Weekends are reserved for family picnics, painting afternoons, or movie nights, cuddled on the sofa. Our home is not just neat and welcoming but is alive with the joy of shared dreams and mutual respect. In every corner, from the well-organized kitchen to the cozy living room.

It was all perfect, but for me, deep inside, something was missing.

There was no single moment I could point to.

No heartbreak.

No crisis.

No shattering event that split my life into a before and after.

Instead, it was like a slow, almost invisible sinking, like standing in soft wet sand, the kind that steals you down inch by inch without you noticing, until your ankles are buried and you can hardly move.

On paper, everything was fine. On paper, my life was enviable; a loving partner, a beautiful child, a stable job, a cozy home that always smelled like lavender and warm food. And yet.

Every morning, I would wake up with a weight in my chest. A dull, persistent ache.

The kind of ache that doesn't scream for attention but gnaws at you constantly.

The coffee tasted the same, the sun rose with the same golden hue through our windows, my child's laughter still

echoed like bells, and still, a part of me remained untouched by it all, standing frozen while life flowed past.

I wasn't sad, not really. I wasn't angry, not exactly.

I was tired, bone-tired, not just from my routines, but from the constant expectation I had set for myself: to be perfect, to be fulfilled, to be radiant at all times.

I was failing that impossible standard, and so the failure multiplied itself into shame.

Where is your gratitude? What right do you have to feel this way?

My inner voice was brutal, unsympathetic.

So I smiled through meetings, packed lunches, replied to texts, paid bills, planned birthdays, laughed at the right moments, and kept the machinery of life running.

But inside, I was flickering. And I was scared, scared that one day, the flicker would go out entirely.

Then it happened on a Wednesday. I remember because Wednesday is always my busiest day, the day that stretches too long with meetings and errands.

By the time I came home that evening, I felt brittle, like one wrong word could shatter me into dust.

As I washed a cup while my better half was making my favourite iced coffee, my hands mindlessly scrubbing, I thought, *'I can't wait until the weekend'*.

But the thought tasted wrong.

Why was I always waiting?

Waiting for Friday, for holidays, for some magical future moment when I'd finally feel alive again?

No. I couldn't wait. The decision came quietly, but firmly.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I will live.

Tomorrow, I will choose me.

For the first time in years, I decided to take a full day just for myself, not squeezed into an hour here or there, not negotiating around others' schedules or expectations. A whole day.

No work. No responsibilities. No guilt. I would build it out of everything that made my heart lift, even if just a little.

Thursday morning arrived with a soft, rose-tinted sky. It felt like a sign.

I slipped out of bed before anyone else stirred, the house still heavy with dreams. True to habit, I made a quick breakfast and packed a tiffin. I left a note on the kitchen counter, just informing: *Gone for the day. I love you all.*

First stop: my favorite coffee shop.

I chose a seat by the window, ordered my usual hazelnut latte with a croissant, and pulled out my battered black diary. Its cover was peeling at the edges, the floral pattern faded, but inside, it held my truest voice. The shade of hanging bougainvillea made it look even more beautiful.

I wrote furiously, pouring out everything I had been bottling up: questions with no answers, fears I hadn't dared to speak aloud, hopes so fragile they trembled on the page.

When I looked up, the world outside the window seemed a little sharper, a little more colorful.

Later, I wandered into a florist's shop, intoxicated by the thick, sweet scent of blooms.

Without overthinking, I chose a bunch of yellow lilies, bright and bold and unapologetically alive. I smiled just looking at them.

A massage appointment next ninety minutes of surrendering to the healing touch of relaxation. As fingers worked the knots in my muscles, I realized just how much tension I had been carrying without even noticing.

At an art supply store, I ran my fingers over brushes and blank canvases. I wasn't a professional artist, not even close, but painting had once been my silent sanctuary. I left with a bag full of colors and promises to myself. My dreams would be colorful and abstract again.

In the afternoon, the quiet halls of the local museum embraced me.

I wandered slowly through rooms of sculpture, of ancient maps, of vibrant modern paintings that screamed emotion in every color.

I took my time. There was no one to rush me, no schedule to obey.

Everywhere I went, my beautiful companion, my diary, came with me, soaking up fleeting impressions, random thoughts, half-formed prayers.

As the afternoon deepened into evening, the museum's soft murmurs faded behind me.

The day had been beautiful, carefully stitched together with things I loved, things that should have filled me up.

But as I stepped back out into the cooling air, a strange sadness pressed against my chest.

It was like standing inside a glass dome. I could see the world's beauty, hear it, even touch it, but somehow, it couldn't fully reach me.

Why? Why couldn't I feel it the way I used to?

The streets buzzed softly around me: couples strolling hand-in-hand, the aroma of street food curling through the air, neon signs flickering to life.

I hailed a cab, too weary to walk home.

Inside the cab, with the city lights blurring past the windows, the quiet became unbearable.

All the questions I had pushed away returned with sharper edges:

Why am I not happy? What am I missing? What is wrong with me?

I had everything I once dreamed of. Why, then, did my heart feel like a hollow drum?

The cab driver hummed a song under his breath, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel. The world outside kept moving, vibrant and indifferent, while I sank deeper inside myself.

And then, through the window, I caught a glimpse of something vast, shimmering, infinite.

The sea.

It appeared so suddenly, so gloriously, that my breath caught in my throat.

As if my soul recognized it before my mind did. "Stop here, please," I said, my voice startling even to myself.

The driver pulled over. I stepped out, clutching my bag, the smell of salt and damp sand hitting me like a homecoming.

Without thinking, without planning, I walked toward the water.

The beach was nearly empty, just a few scattered figures silhouetted against the orange-and-purple sky. The tide had pulled back, leaving the sand cool and damp beneath my feet. I slipped off my shoes and carried them in one hand, the lilies and diary in the other.

Every step forward seemed to peel away a layer of noise from my mind —worries, plans, regrets —until there was nothing left but the simple act of being.

The sun leaned low, kissing the horizon, stretching long golden fingers across the restless surface of the water.

I walked closer until the tiny waves lapped at my toes, whispering against the shore. Here, time melted. Here, there was no tomorrow, no yesterday —only the present, only now. I stood still, letting the waves come and go, each one drawing invisible patterns around my feet.

The sea, in its infinite patience, kept arriving, kept retreating, kept breathing.

I lifted my face to the sky. The colors were unreal, bruised purples, burning oranges, shy pinks fading into the first whispers of night. A painting in motion.

A warm breeze tugged at my hair, the scent of salt and possibility filling my lungs.

For the first time in months, maybe years, I didn't feel like I had to *be* anything. I didn't have to solve, achieve, fix, perform, or be perfect.

I just was.

As I stood there, hypnotized by the endless rhythm of the waves, something inside me cracked open.

Not in a painful way, not like a breaking. More like a blooming.

A sudden, profound understanding unfurled itself inside me, wordless at first, as deep and simple as the sea itself:

Life is in waves.

It hit me all at once —the way the tide touches the shore only to pull away, the way the golden light fades into dusk, the way laughter gives way to quiet, the way seasons turn without apology.

Happiness is not a permanent state, a destination you reach and stay at forever; it is a journey. No one lives in a constant summer. Summer always creates deserts.

We are made of wave crests and dips, brightness and shadow, coming and going, happiness and sorrows, and many times nothingness. No emotion, no rising or falling, just present with no attachment.

And that is not a failure. It is the nature of being alive.

Tears spilled down my cheeks, hot and salty as the sea breeze. But they weren't tears of sorrow. They were tears of recognition. Of acceptance. Of grace.

I thought about my partner, about the quiet ways he supported me, even when he didn't know how lost I felt. I thought about my child, and the pure joy that radiated from them even in the smallest things. I thought about my job, its imperfections and gifts alike. I thought about the

girl I used to be, so full of dreams, and realized she wasn't gone; she was just sleeping under layers of expectation.

I wasn't broken. I wasn't failing. I was human.

The good moments would come. And yes, they would go. But they would come again.

Just like the waves.

All I had to do was keep standing at the shore of my life, open-hearted, knowing the tide always returns.

I stood there for a long time, I don't know how long, my feet sinking a little deeper into the wet sand with every soft pull of the sea. The soft wet sand was releasing me inch by inch, until I was completely free, almost felt like flying.

The lilies in my hand trembled in the evening breeze. My black diary pressed close against my side like a second heartbeat.

Above me, the sky deepened its vivid colors, melting into an endless indigo. Stars pricked through the veil of night one by one, shy and glimmering. And then, rising above the horizon, massive and luminous, the supermoon.

It was breathtaking. A perfect, glowing sphere too large, too bright, too otherworldly to seem real.

I felt the tears come again, but this time, they were quiet tears. Tears of reunion. Tears of coming home to myself.

In the presence of that moon, that vast sea, those endless stars, I felt small —gloriously, beautifully small, and at the same time, deeply connected to everything. The sea was breathing. The earth was spinning. My heart was beating.

And it was all okay. It was all enough.

I knelt and placed the lilies gently at the water's edge, letting a small wave carry them a few inches into the sea before returning them to me like a blessing.

A silent pact between me and the universe: I would not search endlessly outside for happiness. I would not measure my life only by how constant my joy was. I would honor every wave, every season, the bright and the dark alike.

I picked up my diary, opened it to a fresh page, and wrote one simple sentence under the supermoon's gaze: *"I am here. I am enough. Life is in waves."*

The night wrapped around me like a soft shawl as I finally turned away from the sea. The sea splashed a wave, as if waving "Goodbye". I smiled and promised to visit more often.

As I walked back towards the road, my steps were slower, but lighter. I wasn't rushing towards anything anymore, not towards a finish line of perfection, not away from discomfort. I was simply moving forward, wave by wave.

The cab was still there, the driver waiting patiently, looking up at the stars. The point is, I didn't ask him to wait; I already paid for the trip. Yet he was there patiently. When he saw me, he smiled, not a questioning smile, but an understanding one, and I smiled back.

The ride home was silent, but not empty. It was a silence full of peace, full of promises.

Outside the window, the world had not changed; the city still hummed with life, neon lights still blinked, and people still laughed and rushed along the sidewalks.

But inside me, everything had shifted. I had found my way back to wonder.

When I slipped into the house, the familiar scents of home wrapped around me: warm wood, lavender, a hint of cinnamon from the candle I had forgotten to blow out.

My partner was dozing on the couch, our child sprawled against him, a picture of pure, unfiltered love.

I stood there in the doorway for a long moment, drinking it in. This was my life. Messy. Imperfect. Incomplete. And absolutely beautiful.

I tiptoed to my room, set down my bag, and placed my diary by my bedside.

The lilies, now a little windswept, a little wild, I put them in a tall glass of water.

They would bloom tomorrow, opening just a little more with each passing hour. Just like me.

Before I drifted off to sleep, I whispered a promise into the darkness: "I will return."

Not just to the sea, though I would, but to myself. Whenever I felt lost. Whenever I forgot.

I would return to the understanding that life moves in waves.

That happiness is not a place you stay; it is a feeling that visits, just like sorrow. That light is precious because of the dark. That every wave, every season, every breath is sacred.

And I would remember that even on nights when the sky is thick with clouds, the stars are still there. Even when the sea is restless, it is still beautiful. Even when I feel empty, I am still full of life.

In the weeks and months that followed, I did not become magically happy all the time. Life did not suddenly become perfect. There were still hard days, still moments of loneliness, flashes of fear and doubt.

But now, I understand.

When the sadness came, I did not panic. I let it wash over me, knowing it would retreat like the tide. When joy returned, I welcomed it fully, savoring it without clinging.

I visited the sea often. Sometimes alone, sometimes with my family. Each time, it greeted me like an old friend, reminding me of who I was.

At home, I found small ways to live with the waves: Painting when the urge struck. Sitting in the little garden with my child, marveling at ladybugs. Writing in my diary not just when I was troubled, but when I was grateful.

The full moon returned a month later. And when it did, I stood barefoot in the backyard, lifted my face to the sky, and smiled. It was like meeting an old friend who was far away, but a “Hello” was enough to assure someone was there, always, in good or bad.

I was not trying to be happy every second. I was simply living. And in that living, I found something even better than happiness.

I found peace.

Kintsugi- Beauty in Broken

The tablecloth was crisp, perfectly ironed, and beige, a neutral shade that made everything on it stand out. At its center stood a small glass vase holding a single lily. The flower was probably white, but the restaurant's warm, golden lighting gave it a soft yellow tint, like a drop of sunlight caught in bloom. Beside it, a European-style French vanilla candle flickered gently, its flame dancing in rhythm with the subtle live music. The scent of vanilla mingled with the aroma of fine cuisine, creating an inviting atmosphere that felt both intimate and timeless.

"This is the perfect setting," Sona said, her eyes scanning the carefully arranged table with admiration. "We could do something like this at home, don't you think?"

Yash nodded, offering a small smile. He appreciated aesthetics, but his attention wasn't on the candle, the flower, or even the soft lighting. His gaze was fixed on her, his wife, his partner of ten years, the love of his life. She looked radiant tonight. The dark green dress she wore was his favorite color on her, one that brought out the warmth in her complexion. This was the exact color she had been wearing when they first met. Her hair was elegantly pinned back, a few wisps falling naturally to frame her face. She wore only a touch of makeup, just enough to accentuate the features he already found beautiful.

The candlelight caught the sparkle in her eyes, but to him, it was her perfume that left a stronger impression, delicate, floral, unmistakably hers. She was wearing the same perfume for the last 10 years, which she gets from a place she never revealed. In a moment of quiet anticipation, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small velvet box.

He placed it gently on the table and opened it. “Happy 10th,” he said softly, sliding the ring onto her finger.

It was a solitaire ring, simple and stunning, a forever diamond. The moment wasn’t a surprise to her, as they had agreed upon a year ago, but it still felt monumental. Her smile widened as she admired the stone catching the candlelight. There was a quiet joy in her eyes, the kind that didn’t need grand declarations. This was the culmination of ten years of shared mornings, late-night talks, inside jokes, and unspoken understandings.

There was live music with a soulful voice along with piano, *Ain’t No Sunshine* by Bill Withers started playing in the background. The soulful tune seemed to embrace them, adding a layer of sentiment to the already tender moment.

“Thank you,” she said, still gazing at the ring. “This dinner is my gift to you.” She had planned everything—the place, the reservation. Everything reflected her thoughtfulness.

Yash leaned back slightly, a playful gleam in his eyes. “It’s all exactly as you like.” She laughed softly. “Isn’t it perfect?” He reached across the table, his fingers brushing hers. “More than perfect,” he said sincerely. “It’s something I could never have planned this beautifully.”

And in that quiet, candlelit corner of the world, they both knew this evening would stay with them like the ring, like the memories for years to come.

The soft hum of conversation, the clinking of cutlery, and the mellow tones of music created an ambiance that felt suspended in time. After the ring had found its place on Sona's finger, and their hands found each other across the table, the first course arrived.

A delicate amuse-bouche of beetroot tartare topped with goat cheese mousse was placed before them. Yash wasn't expecting much; it was, after all, a tiny bite, but the moment it touched his tongue, his eyes widened. The earthiness of beet, the tang of cheese, and a whisper of citrus zest played in perfect harmony. "Wow," he murmured. "That was... unexpected."

Sona laughed gently. "I think we're in for a memorable night." It was the first experience of a chef's tasting menu for both of them.

The second course arrived with a quiet reverence. The server leaned in slightly and spoke in hushed tones, as if revealing a secret. On the plate was what looked more like a modernist painting than food: brushstrokes of carrot purée, dots of herb-infused oil, tiny edible flowers, and what appeared to be a translucent raviolo resting in the center. "This is our heirloom carrot and lemongrass consommé, sealed inside a rice flour pouch," the server explained.

"Consommé!?" Sona asked with hesitation. "Clear soup," the server replied with a smile. Yash stared at the dish in awe. "It's almost a shame to eat it." But they did, slowly, savoring the complex yet comforting flavors, like tasting art that touched the soul.

By the time the third course was offered, they were presented with choices: roasted chops with spiced plum glaze or wild mushroom risotto scented with truffle oil. Sona was torn. “You know I love mushrooms,” she said, “but those chops...”

“Let’s do both,” Yash suggested. “We’ll share.” She smiled. “Perfect.”

The fourth course followed the same pattern: seared scallops on cauliflower purée with crisp veg tuile, or a handmade spinach and ricotta ravioli bathed in sage brown butter. After another moment of thoughtful debate and playful back-and-forth, they ordered both once again.

With each course, their conversation became more fluid, more intimate, as if each bite unlocked another story, another memory. It was more than food; it was a connection.

As the evening deepened, the final course approached. But instead of the usual server, a tall man in a black chef’s coat came to their table with a serene presence. In his hands, he carried a bowl—a simple, elegant ceramic piece, with visible cracks mended with shimmering gold.

Inside it was a single dessert: a round doodh jalebi, infused with pista, chuara, and kesar milk, resting in a small pool of Rabri and saffron foam, sprinkled with pistachios and almonds.

Sona was immediately drawn to the bowl. “This is stunning,” she said, eyes wide. “Where can we find this kind of tableware?” Yash gave her a playful look, half amused and half embarrassed. “You’re in full home decor mode, even during dessert?”

The chef smiled gently, clearly used to this kind of reaction. "From Japan," he replied.

"This bowl," he continued, "is from Japan. It's original Kintsugi —an ancient Japanese art. When something breaks, it is repaired with gold, making it more beautiful than before. I brought it back with me during a time when I was broken. I was going to give up cooking. My mentor gave me a Kintsugi cup and said, 'This is you now. Cracked, yes. But not ruined. Not less. More.'"

He smiled at them both. "Your server told me it's a special night for you. Thank you for letting us be a part of it."

Sona and Yash listened in silence, moved by the vulnerability behind the soft-spoken words. The dessert, though simple in appearance, was a triumph of flavor: the bite of crispy Jalebi, the brightness of rabri, and a trace of saffron warmth. It was comfort and elegance in a single bite.

As the chef bid them goodnight, he added, "I hope tonight becomes part of your story."

Sona nodded, eyes a little misty. "It already has."

They sat for a while longer, fingers intertwined, sipping the last of their wine. The tablecloth still bore the imprint of their shared meal. The candle had burned lower, the lily now softly drooping under the heat, and the pianist was playing another gentle melody, a Disney tune this time, *Tale as Old as Time*.

Yash looked at her, her face glowing from the inside out. "Ten years," he said softly. She squeezed his hand. "And still choosing each other." He smiled, the golden glow from the Kintsugi bowl still dancing to the melody.

Twelve years ago, Sona and Yash had met at a weekend art workshop. She had signed up to explore her creative side; he was dragged there by a friend who was also Sona's senior. While the others focused on brush technique, shading, and composition, Yash was more interested in making Sona laugh. She rolled her eyes at his messy attempts at watercolor but smiled when he offered to clean her paint water for her.

What began as playful banter turned into late-night calls, walks after work, and coffee dates that stretched into long dinners. They didn't agree on everything. Sona loved Mediterranean food, and Yash was a die-hard fan of spicy North Indian fare. She woke up at 6 a.m. to journal and meditate; he often worked late into the night, preferring to sleep in. She enjoyed soulful music, but he was a fan of hard rock.

She was spiritual, and he was the first atheist she had ever met. Sona was a coffee person, while Yash preferred chai. But none of that seemed to matter then. The differences were charming, even exciting. They were learning something new every day together.

They got married in a winter ceremony surrounded by blooming marigolds and jasmine. It was a perfect day full of laughter, music, and a shared vow to grow together, no matter what.

But life, as it often does, had other plans.

After a year of marriage, their differences stopped being endearing and started becoming walls. Weekend plans were a tug-of-war: he wanted to catch up with college friends she didn't care for, and she preferred quiet brunches with a circle he found pretentious.

Mealtimes became battlegrounds. Yash would complain about the “blandness” of her plant-based cuisine experiments, while she would roll her eyes at the rich, greasy takeouts he ordered in. He would often complain how she used to love all those tikkas and kebabs on their date nights, and she would clarify, “I like them, but occasionally.”

Sona longed for quiet mornings and early nights. Yash thrived on spontaneity and late-night chaos. She dreamed of traveling the world and making memories, while he preferred collecting beautiful objects and curating comfort at home. She loved to talk about future plans, possibilities, dreams, while he was rooted in the present, finding meaning and living in the now.

She needed emotional check-ins; he believed love didn’t need constant articulation.

She preferred intimate evenings, just the two of them; he wanted to host friends and share stories.

She believed in celebrating every little milestone; he saw no need to make a fuss over what felt ordinary.

She sought depth in every conversation; he often escaped into silence, needing space to think.

She expressed love through words and gestures; he showed it through presence and consistency.

She grew through conflict; he shut down to avoid it.

They weren’t opposites. They were simply built differently. And sometimes, that difference felt like distance.

Worse still, neither noticed when they stopped sharing their worlds. They each clung tighter to their routines, their

needs, their individual spaces until the distance between them was no longer emotional but painfully physical. Conversations became transactional. Date nights were forgotten. Laughter disappeared.

For each of them, it was self-respect, something deeply personal and hard-earned, but to the other, it often looked like pride, like ego standing in the way of love. The word "divorce" was never screamed in a fight, but it had crept in slowly on legal brochures they collected "just in case," on half-drafted emails to therapists, and in the silence of nights spent sleeping on opposite sides of the bed.

They both stood their ground, firm in their beliefs, certain they hadn't been wrong. But somewhere, beneath the defenses and the silence, each of them knew: the other wasn't wrong either. Their truths had collided, not to win, but to be heard. And in that quiet recognition, layered with pain and love, they realized that being right wasn't the same as being whole.

After a few years, cold years had passed, one evening, the living room was dimly lit, except for the bluish flicker of the TV that played to no one. Sona stood by the dining table, arms crossed, staring at the cold dinner she had prepared hours ago. A lentil soup, some roasted vegetables, and a warm salad. She had plated everything carefully, hoping for a quiet dinner after a long, lonely week.

Yash walked in, dropping his gym bag carelessly near the couch. "Smells healthy," he muttered without looking at her. Sona's jaw clenched. "It was hot two hours ago."

"Yeah, well, I told you I had a late client call," he said, opening the fridge and pulling out a leftover box of biryani instead. "You could've sent a message," she replied, her voice tight.

Yash shrugged. "I didn't think it would matter. You don't even eat what I eat anymore. What's the point of eating together when we're on opposite ends of the food spectrum?"

That did it.

"You think this is just about food?" she snapped. "You don't see how much I try, do you? I plan things, I cook, I compromise. And you, you just live like you're still a bachelor with a flat mate, not a husband with a partner."

"Oh, so now I'm the selfish one?" he shot back. "At least I'm not turning this house into some spa retreat I didn't ask for. Candles everywhere, fancy throws, so many plants, and you need everything placed perfectly. I am not that perfect. Maybe I am messy." Sona's eyes burned. "You used to *like* that I had a calming presence. Now it annoys you because it makes you confront your chaos."

"And you used to love that I brought spontaneity. Now I'm just 'immature,' right?" he said, his voice raised — too harsh. "What do you want from me?" Sona's voice dropped. "To show up. Like you used to."

The silence afterward wasn't peaceful; it was pulsing, loaded. Yash grabbed his keys again. "Where are you going?" she asked. "Out. I need space. A few hours. That's all."

Her eyes didn't plead. She just looked exhausted. "That's what you always say."

"Because staying ends in yelling."

"Or maybe," she said, softly now, "you're just not willing to stay when it's hard."

That hit him. He froze. A long silence followed. The kind that doesn't cool tempers; it hardens them. "Now even I think we should take a break," she finally said, almost in a whisper.

Yash didn't reply. He just grabbed his biryani and walked outside, closing the door without another word. He thought space would help. Silence would soothe. But all he felt was something breaking quietly, permanently.

And inside their apartment, Sona didn't cry. She just sat on the couch, motionless, her hands resting in her lap, eyes fixed on nothing. It wasn't anger or sadness anymore; it was the numbness that follows too many arguments, too many words said and unsaid. A quiet void where once there had been warmth. The room felt full of echoes, and yet painfully silent.

It took them five days to talk again. Not because they were punishing each other, but because neither knew what to say that wouldn't cause more harm.

But then, one day, Sona found an old note among her accessories—a note Yash had written to her during their first year of marriage. It had been scribbled on a napkin at a cafe where they'd once talked for hours: *"You and I are different notes, but the same melody."*

That line stayed with her and urged her to give them one more chance.

Then one quiet Sunday, with the late winter sun slipping through the curtains, Sona texted: "Drive with me?" Yash stared at the message for a long time before replying: "Okay."

They didn't speak much during the drive. The air between them was heavy but not hostile. Familiar music

played slowly from the days they used to sing along to everything, even the wrong lyrics.

Sona drove aimlessly until the city melted into the outskirts. Eventually, they reached the lake. The one where they'd once spent an entire day picnicking with just sandwiches and cheap wine. Where Yash had fallen asleep on her lap, sunburned and smiling. It was the same spot where they had once watched their first rain together years ago, sitting close, sharing a single blanket, laughing at how unprepared they were. Back then, the rain felt romantic, like a blessing washing over something new.

They sat by the water in silence for a while. Ducks drifted by. Wind rustled through brittle reeds. It was the kind of setting where big things could be said without sounding like lines from a drama.

"I thought walking away would help," Yash finally said. "I needed the noise in my head to stop." Sona nodded. "Did it?" He didn't answer right away. "No. It just made the silence louder."

She stared at the lake, her voice barely above a whisper. "That night, I kept thinking how many more times can we do this before it breaks for good?" Yash turned to her quietly. "Maybe it already did." She looked at him then not with hurt, but with clarity. "So, what do we do with these broken pieces?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Glue them? Walk away from them?"

"Or," she said slowly, "we could try to turn them into something else."

His brows furrowed slightly. "Like what?" "I don't know yet," she smiled faintly. "But if we both keep holding even just one piece each... maybe we can figure it out."

They sat there, not with solutions, but with something softer: the willingness to start again. After a while, Yash reached for her hand. She let him take it. It didn't feel like a grand gesture. It felt like a beginning.

That afternoon didn't fix everything. But it was the day they stopped fighting against each other and started fighting *for* each other.

The first few weeks after the lake meeting felt fragile, like walking on a tightrope above everything they had once broken. There were no sweeping gestures, no cinematic confessions, just small, hesitant efforts made with the hope that something durable could still grow from what had cracked.

Yash began coming home earlier. Not every day, but enough to notice. On Tuesdays, he made dinner. Not gourmet meals, just things he knew she liked: stir-fried chicken with his favourite mashed potatoes, sometimes pasta with roasted vegetables. Sona, in turn, stopped trying to make every dinner into an art installation and embraced simple meals that fed them both.

Once, he burned the vegetables, and they ended up ordering pizza, but Sona didn't complain. She smiled and said, "It's the best burnt veggies I've ever had."

Sona, in turn, stopped saying no when Yash invited her to casual get-togethers with his friends. She still didn't connect with all of them, but she tried. She sat through conversations about fantasy football and old college pranks, and Yash noticed the way she laughed even when she didn't

fully get the jokes. It meant something to him, this gentle reaching across the aisle.

They began sharing a Sunday morning coffee on the balcony, no phones, no agenda. Sometimes they talked. Sometimes they sat in silence. They brought back morning walks. They began a shared playlist again, each adding songs that reminded them of better days or braver hopes.

After a few months, they agreed to therapy. They agreed to try again, not to change each other, but to understand. They made a list of small promises: one shared meal a week, one honest conversation, one compliment, one act of kindness.

In therapy, they spoke about expectations, about growing apart, not because of a lack of love, but because of unspoken resentment and exhausted empathy. Sona admitted that she often felt like she was living in a world Yash didn't want to be part of. Yash confessed he had felt judged, like a guest in his own home.

The therapist asked them to reintroduce themselves as they were now, not as who they had been when they met. So, they started over, in tiny ways.

Yash learned how to cook croissants, one of Sona's favorite desserts. Sona told him she wanted to go on a spontaneous road trip, something totally out of character for her; she loved to plan each and every detail of the trip.

On their fifth anniversary, Yash booked a place this time keeping in mind both of their preferences and likings.

One weekend, they drove out of the city without a plan. They argued in the car about directions. They got lost. They laughed. Then ended up at a sleepy hill town and found a new café where they shared a tiramisu and a seat

by the window. That night, in a modest hotel room with thin blankets and no room service, they held each other's hands like people who had fought to find their way back. And perhaps that made the holding all the more sacred.

Rebuilding wasn't a straight line. There were days when old wounds reopened, when they forgot how far they had come. But there was also a growing awareness between them and an understanding that love was no longer just about butterflies and shared playlists. It was now about the willingness to sit with discomfort, to stay at the table even when things got quiet or complicated.

Not of their perfect love. But of their *chosen* love.

A love that had been cracked, mended, and made more beautiful in the process.

On one of their trips to the island they had already visited twice before, everything felt strangely new. The shoreline was the same, the familiar bend in the road still led to the tiny café they loved, and the breeze carried the same scent of salt and hibiscus. But something had shifted within them. They walked the same paths, but slower now, more aware. The silence between them wasn't awkward; it was comfortable, reflective. The island hadn't changed. They had. And in seeing it through the eyes of who they had become wiser, softer, a little scared, they discovered a different kind of beauty.

"I was thinking," she said softly, "we never really got to say new vows. Not after everything." Yash tilted his head. "I thought we didn't need to. We're living them now." "I know," she replied. "But still... maybe it's worth saying out loud. Just for us." He nodded. "Then let's do it. No scripts. Just truth."

They stood on the beach, side by side, their footprints pressed gently into the damp sand. The golden sun dipped slowly toward the horizon, casting long shadows behind them, bathing everything in a soft, amber glow. It wasn't just another sunset; it was a witness. To their survival. To everything they had broken and rebuilt. The waves whispered at their feet, and the wind carried no urgency, only calm.

She breathed in, gathering her words. "I vow," she began, "to not turn away when things get difficult. To sit with the cracks, and not pretend they aren't there. I vow to choose understanding over being right, and love over being comfortable. I vow to see you not as who I want you to be, but who you are... even when that version is changing."

She paused, looking into his eyes. "And I vow to make space for joy, again and again, even when it has to be rediscovered."

Yash swallowed hard, his voice lower, steady but emotional. "I vow to meet you in the middle," he said. "To stop hiding behind silence and sarcasm, and let you in. I vow to protect the peace between us, not with control, but with care. I vow to make this home, not just a place we live, but a place we *return* to... no matter how far apart we drift."

He reached out and placed a hand over hers. "And I vow to honor our flaws not as something shameful, but something sacred. The places we've broken... are the same places where light has entered."

They sat for a moment in silence, surrounded by stillness, hearts full of everything that had brought them back to this place. In the stillness that followed, in the warmth of the fading light and the closeness of that small

table, Sona and Yash sat together *whole again, not because they never broke, but because they chose to mend.*

Sona thought of all this as the chef walked away from their table, leaving behind the Kintsugi bowl, a bowl once broken, now mended with gold.

Yash, at the same time, was thanking the Universe for everything in life.

She looked at Yash, eyes soft. "We're like that bowl," she whispered.

Yash nodded, lifting his glass. "Cracks and all," he said. "Still beautiful."

On their 11th anniversary, the apartment was quiet, filled with the soft scent of vanilla and the golden glow of early evening. Sona stepped into the dining area and paused. At the center of the table was a perfectly wrapped gift, beside a bouquet of fresh yellow lilies, her favorite.

She smiled, already knowing it was him. Carefully, she untied the ribbon and lifted the lid. Inside, nestled in velvet, were two Kintsugi cups. Their delicate cracks glimmered with gold, each line a story in itself. Inside was a tag, an original Japanese product.

"You liked them," Yash said from behind her, his voice gentle. "Loved," she replied, holding one up to the light.

They stood there for a long moment, looking at the cups, at each other. So much had been broken. So much had been mended. But this wasn't just about healing anymore.

This time, it wasn't about repair. It was about choice. Choosing to stay. To grow. To see beauty in what had once been fragile.

Yash poured black coffee for her, green tea for himself. No sugar. They clinked the cups together softly.

And with that quiet sound, their story, cracked, golden, enduring, carried on.

Broken once, beautiful now.

Dancing to Liberation

Tapping my feet to the exact beat of the DJ, I was intensely aware of myself, my posture, my steps, the sway of my dress as it twirled elegantly with every movement. By the way, I spent a whole week finalising my dress for the event, and the fit was more than perfect. My fingers extended gracefully, my toes pointed just right, my rhythm precise. I wasn't just dancing; I was performing. I was thriving under the spotlight, relishing the admiring eyes. For a long time, this had been my definition of joy.

Dance was my first love. As a child, I watched talent shows where dance routines always received the loudest applause. That was enough for me to decide. This was going to be my passion. From school functions to weddings, from college festivals to local competitions, I was always the first one on the list. You only needed to say, "Aisha, do you wanna da..." and I'd already be tying my anklets. I remember my mother's half-exasperated smile as I ran through the living room practicing spins while she tried to get dinner ready.

Each time I stood on stage, a certain stillness took over me just before the music began. The silence would stretch, and I'd feel the heartbeat of the crowd: some skeptical, some excited, some indifferent. But the moment the beat dropped, I became someone else. Each movement was a declaration: I was here, I mattered, I could captivate.

At our college farewell, the final dance was more than just another performance. It was a culmination of years of practice and passion. The stage lights were warm against my skin, the crowd buzzing with nostalgia. My costume was a carefully chosen flowy maroon outfit with silver mirror-work that glittered under the lights. I had rehearsed every step, every turn, every lift of the arm. During a short break, a friend handed me a small bottle of water. I drank it all at once, not even noticing the odd taste. She gave me a mysterious smile and said, "Now you'll know how to really dance."

I laughed, assuming it was just a teasing comment. But as the music restarted and the final routine began, something shifted. The spinning sequence, which usually made me slightly dizzy, felt weightless. My body floated. With every spin, I felt more detached, more ethereal, as if I was made of stardust and silk. The boundaries between me and the rhythm disappeared. My feet moved, but it wasn't just choreography; it was communion.

When the music ended, I slowly came to a halt, panting lightly. The applause erupted, louder than I'd ever heard. I should have felt pride, joy, triumph. But I felt... emptiness. A beautiful emptiness. It was like watching yourself from afar, utterly calm, untouched by praise.

Later, I learned that the water had been spiked with a recreational substance. I was horrified. But beneath that horror was curiosity because I had, for the first time, tasted the state of flow. The elusive zone where action and awareness merge. It was the first time I realized we don't dance for others' applause; we dance for our own happiness.

That realization left me conflicted. Part of me was disturbed. Another part was intrigued. For the first time, I had experienced what many described but few understood: the state of flow. A moment where the self dissolves and only the act remains. I was adamant not to chase it through chemicals. I had to earn that state.

That moment gave me a new direction in life.

I began researching. I read psychology papers, artist interviews, and yogic philosophies. I stumbled upon Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow and realized that what I felt wasn't madness, it was the pinnacle of presence. This was the concept that I could relate to and understand best. I wish I could meet her someday and express my gratitude for her incredible work.

I began exploring other avenues: music, writing, running, even pottery. I felt closest to flow while painting, but it is important to mention that funds were scarce, and so were my options. I was still in college. So most often, I found myself at the steps of old museums and art galleries. Something about being surrounded by human expression across centuries stilled me.

The first time I saw the Dancing Girl from the Harappan civilization, it took my breath away. She stood with one hand on her hip, the other arm loosely by her side, filled with bangles, hair neatly tied, exuding confidence. That bronze statuette, just 10.5 cm tall, held within her the grace of a thousand generations. I sat on the museum bench for over an hour, sketching her, reading about her. I imagined her life, her movements, the music of her time. I felt a strange lineage like she was an ancient sister whispering, "Dance beyond applause. Dance to remember."

Soon after, I started traveling across India. The next chapter of my life started. I got a job after my graduation. My job paid just enough to sustain short trips every few months. I visited Ajanta and Ellora, lost myself in the temples of Khajuraho, watched sunrises over Varanasi's ghats, and trekked through the jungles of Coorg. Each place had its own story, its own rhythm, its own silence. And I learned to listen.

After a year, I got a better job that came with both better pay and more flexibility. I applied for a passport, and soon, its pages were stamped with adventures, though close to our border but far from our world. Nepal's monasteries, Sri Lanka's beaches, Bhutan's mountains. Each place added to the map of my soul.

The most defining of those trips was my trek to the Tiger's Nest Monastery in Paro, Bhutan. The path was steep, the air thin, the silence deep. As I reached the top, the wind wrapped around me, cool and scented with pine. Prayer flags danced in the air. The monastery, clinging to the cliffside like a secret, gleamed against the blue sky. I stood there for a long time, alone, soaking in the magnitude of the view.

And suddenly, it happened again. That lightness. That flow. I felt suspended between sky and earth, not above, not below, just being. Time melted. I didn't feel ecstatic; I felt whole. I didn't take a single selfie. That moment belonged to my memory alone.

I was ecstatic I found my calling, I thought but God had bigger plans for the world.

Then came the pandemic. The world came to a standstill. Lockdowns turned once-busy cities into ghost towns. I, like everyone else, was forced indoors. Travel

plans were canceled. Museums shut down. Even dance felt too indulgent when the world was grieving. It was an altogether new world we were living in, like no one had imagined in their wildest dreams.

The restlessness gnawed at me until one day I picked up a knife, pulled out a chopping board, and started cooking.

It wasn't a sudden epiphany. At first, it was a necessity as there was no help, no deliveries, nothing. It started with simple things, boiling rice, sautéing vegetables, and making dal just like my mother did. But slowly, the rhythm returned. The hiss of mustard seeds hitting hot oil, the way onions turned translucent, the harmony of spices swirling into one another, it was a different kind of dance.

Cooking demanded attention and rewarded presence. I couldn't scroll through my phone while tempering spices. I couldn't daydream while the chapati puffed. Every step was precise, every decision had consequences. And somewhere in that ritual, I found flow again.

I started exploring cuisines, writing recipes in a journal, and plating dishes with artistic intent. I shared photos with friends. I hosted virtual dinner parties. The kitchen became my studio. The first time I tasted a dish and felt it was perfect, subtle, complex, soulful, I almost cried. It wasn't just about food. It was about creating something that nourished, not just filled.

The high I'd once chased on stage now came in the silence after dinner, when I sat alone with the aroma of roasted spices lingering in the air, and a deep satisfaction settled in my bones.

I began to notice life lessons hidden in cooking: patience is rewarded, simplicity triumphs over complexity, slow heat brings out deeper flavors, good things take time. Everything has its moment.

Despite the creative refuge I found in cooking, a quiet unrest still lingered beneath the surface. I was going through the motions, doing office work, managing chores, experimenting with new recipes, but there was a subtle yearning that simmered beneath the structure of my day. A gentle ache for something deeper, for stillness perhaps, though I wouldn't have known to call it that then.

It was during this period that a friend invited me to join her online meditation workshop. She was experimenting with online sessions and needed participants for her trial runs. I agreed half-heartedly, more out of loyalty than genuine interest. I didn't believe in silent sitting. I was a dancer, a mover, a traveler. My peace came in motion, in rhythm, not stillness. Sitting quietly in a room, trying not to think, felt not just foreign but almost absurd.

That first session was uncomfortable. The silence in the room was too loud. Every tick of the clock, every shallow breath, felt magnified. My legs ached after ten minutes, and my back felt like it had aged thirty years in half an hour. My mind refused to settle; it leapt from one thought to another, as if mocking the idea of calm. When the session ended, I exhaled in relief and mentally decided that would be my first and last attempt.

But life has a strange way of returning you to what you resist most.

Months passed. The lockdown wore on. And despite my culinary successes, the restless tide returned, stronger

this time. I started noticing that even my cooking became mechanical. Something was missing. I was creating, yes, but I wasn't always present. My focus drifted, and along with it, the joy of the act.

One afternoon, while scrolling idly through messages, I saw my friend's name pop up again. This time, she wasn't offering a class. She had simply posted a quote: "*Flow isn't just for the artist; it's for the soul who's listening.*" The words struck something within me. Not just because of their truth, but because they reminded me that I wasn't really listening to myself, to life, to silence.

I messaged her immediately. This time, I didn't join out of obligation, I joined with intention, the intention to attain. We started private 1-on-1 sessions. The first few times were still difficult. My body fidgeted. My mind wandered. But my curiosity had grown stronger than my discomfort. Each session peeled back a layer of both my body and soul. Some days were chaotic, some serene. But each offered a brief and beautiful insight into that stillness I'd once thought unreachable.

She introduced me to breathwork and simple grounding techniques. We meditated on gratitude, on presence, on letting go. Some days I cried quietly, surprised by emotions I didn't even know I had stored. Other days I sat in a strange calm, like resting in the eye of a storm. Slowly, I increased my duration. From ten minutes to twenty, then to thirty. Initially, I practiced music meditation later, I didn't need music. I didn't need guidance. I just needed space. Space to sit. Space to be.

Alongside meditation, she nudged me toward journaling. "Write every day," she said. "Even if it's a line. Even if it makes no sense." At first, my entries were stiff

and sparse lists of to-dos, fragments of emotion, sometimes just the weather. But over time, the pages grew more honest. I wrote about my fears, my longing for connection, my childhood memories, my dreams. The journal became a mirror. And then, slowly, it became a friend.

One morning, after a particularly profound session, I wrote: *"I am beginning to hear myself again."* That sentence stayed with me. It marked a turning point not because I had reached the destination, but because I had finally found a reliable compass. Stillness no longer frightened me. It nourished me. It grounded me in a way applause never could.

Meditation and journaling reshaped my daily rhythm. They helped me slow down not just in action, but in thought. They taught me to be gentle with myself, to recognize my needs without judgment, and to make peace with my imperfections. Most of all, they opened a door to self-love, not the loud, performative kind, but the quiet, steady presence that says, "You are enough, as you are."

As my life began to settle into a more reflective rhythm filled with meditation, cooking, and quiet journaling, another door opened, one I hadn't consciously knocked on: spirituality.

It began subtly. A neighbor invited me to a community *kirtan*, a devotional gathering where people sang and danced together in reverence to the divine. I went mostly out of curiosity, not knowing what to expect. I imagined it would be another spiritual performance, perhaps a lecture or some solemn chanting. What I walked into, however, was pure, pulsating energy.

The room was dimly lit, strewn with mats and cushions, the smell of incense curling through the air. A

group had already gathered around a harmonium and tabla, and the lead singer was gently calling out a chant, which the rest repeated. It was call-and-response, simple words, easy melody. But something about it stirred me.

As the rhythm picked up, so did the movement. People clapped, swayed, and even spun in circles. Some danced like no one was watching. Others stood still with their eyes closed, tears streaming silently. It wasn't a performance; it was a surrender.

I stood there for a while, awkward and self-conscious. But gradually, something within me loosened. I began clapping, then moving, and before I knew it, I was dancing not for applause, not for aesthetic beauty, but from a place deeper than anything I had known. It was a dance of devotion.

I remembered my childhood performances, the longing for applause, the perfection of posture. But this was different. Here, no one cared if my toes were pointed or if my hands were aligned. The only thing that mattered was the intention behind the movement.

I began attending regularly. Each *kirtan* was different, sometimes lively and energetic, other times soft and meditative. Over time, I stopped worrying about how I looked or whether I was doing it "right." I allowed myself to become a channel, letting rhythm, breath, and devotion merge. It was the same flow state I had felt on stage, in Bhutan, in the kitchen, but this time, it felt connected to something far greater than myself.

The music dissolved boundaries. I felt part of something ancient, sacred, and universal. A love that had no object, only direction. Upward. Inward. Everywhere.

For the first time in my life, dance became prayer. And through those nights of singing and swaying, of losing myself to the beat of drums and the repetition of sacred names, I learned another truth: liberation isn't always loud. Sometimes, it's just letting go of the idea that you need to become something more, when all you ever needed was to remember who you truly are.

My dance was not to please others or God; it was for me, happy me, or just me. I didn't care how my dress looked or how my steps appeared. The point was, I didn't care.

I was there. Fully.

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon. The kind of day that doesn't demand much of you, where the world seems to pause just long enough to let you catch your breath. I had tucked myself into a corner of my favorite café with a book in hand, warm sunlight filtering through sheer curtains, casting lazy golden stripes across my table. I wasn't particularly reading, I was floating between words and thoughts, between the aroma of roasted coffee beans and the hum of soft jazz.

Then came the voices. Five young women sat at the table next to mine, chatting animatedly. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but their laughter, sharp and sincere, was difficult to ignore. They were talking about coffee, of all things, arguing about which one was best, who is hungrier, and the fun antics of a kid unbothered about the surrounding society. She made me want to be a kid again. It was light-hearted, joyful, and unfiltered.

And then, amid the bubbling conversation, one of them said something that stopped me mid-sip:

“You know what? The best kind of peace comes when you accept life as it is.”

The sentence wasn't profound in tone; it wasn't a dramatic declaration. But it landed in me like a whisper that echoes through an empty cathedral.

Accept life as it is.

Not as I wished it to be. Not as I planned, curated, or fought to control. Just as it was in all its messiness and grace, its chaos and calm. The sentence rolled around in my mind for days after that. It unraveled things inside me.

Until that moment, so much of my life had been about seeking chasing applause, chasing highs, chasing stillness, chasing purpose. And yet, in that single sentence, I found an invitation to *stop running*. To pause. To receive life, instead of trying to sculpt it into something it wasn't.

That café conversation became a turning point. I didn't even know their names. But their words became a quiet mantra.

I started practicing acceptance, not resignation, but presence. When the power cut off in the middle of a meditation, I didn't curse the noise of the generator. When a friend canceled plans at the last minute, I didn't feel abandoned. When the meal didn't turn out as I imagined, I didn't toss it. I accepted it. I tasted it anyway.

Life didn't become easier overnight. But my relationship with it softened.

I remember one evening, a week after that café visit, sitting on my couch watching the sunset through my apartment window. The sky had cracked open in shades of apricot and crimson, and the last of the day's light stretched

long shadows across the floor. I wasn't doing anything significant. No music, no meditation, no masterpiece in the oven. Just sitting. Just breathing.

Just me and the soft hum of the world outside. I looked around at the space I had created, paintings on the walls, spices lined up on the rack, journals filled with ink and honesty. My life. My choices. My journey.

And then, without warning, I felt it again, with no ceremony or fanfare; it washed over me.

That familiar sensation, not a high, not a thrill, but a weightless peace.

A feeling of being suspended in the present, not tethered by the past or pulled by the future.

No striving. No judging. No proving. Just being.

And in that moment, I realized something deeper than all the books and workshops had taught me

Liberation wasn't something to reach for.

It was something to fall into.

Something to allow.

I no longer needed applause, mountains, or even perfect meditations to feel whole. I could find peace in peeling garlic, in sipping tea, in watching clouds drift without purpose.

It was in this space, this expansive, soft, honest space, that I truly met myself. Not the dancer, the traveler, the creator, the seeker. Just me. Aisha. As I was.

And for the first time in my life, that felt enough.

I loved myself.

Not the curated version. Not the performing dancer.
Not the mindful traveler.

But the raw, quiet, sometimes messy, often uncertain
self.

The one who had searched so long for liberation, only
to find that it had always been inside her.

Liberation wasn't about escaping. It was about
returning. Returning to myself.

And in that return, I discovered the ultimate high. A
love so full, so unwavering, so true, it didn't need to be
proven. It just was.

Self-love is the ultimate liberation. And I am free.

A Place Called Yesterday

As Raunak walked out of the movie hall, his steps were slow, his heart unusually heavy. The crowd around him buzzed with excitement, some discussing their favorite scenes, others laughing about the jokes. But Raunak stayed quiet. The neon lights of the multiplex, the giant screens, and the glittering food counters all swirled around him like a dream too big to grasp.

It was his first time in a multiplex, a place he had only seen in commercials and posters. Back in his hometown, movies were watched in old single-screen theatres with torn seats and grainy audio, but the charm there was unmatched. Tonight, though, was different. His new friends had booked the tickets as a weekend surprise plan. The movie was full of energy, loud rock music, fast-paced scenes, and a story of four close-knit friends who stuck together through thick and thin. It hit closer to home than he had expected.

What began as excitement had slowly turned into a hollow ache in his chest. He hadn't expected to feel so moved, so nostalgic. But when the credits rolled and the hall dimmed back to reality, Raunak's eyes were misty. He quickly blinked away the tears, not wanting anyone to notice. The boy from the small town wasn't ready to show his softer side, not yet. He wasn't sure if this city had room for emotions that weren't filtered, curated, or timed.

He kept walking, the laughter of his friends echoing faintly behind him. He was grateful for them, they were kind, good people, but they hadn't known him before this new chapter of his life began. They hadn't seen the carefree version of Raunak, the one who played cricket barefoot in the lane outside his house, who shared snacks with the same four friends every afternoon, who knew every shopkeeper and every street dog in his neighborhood.

It had only been a few months since Raunak left home, but it felt like another lifetime.

The metro city was overwhelming in ways he couldn't describe. The buildings were taller, but the conversations felt shorter. Everyone moved fast, talked fast, lived fast. There were so many people around, yet so little warmth. Smiles were rare, eye contact rarer.

"In big cities, people don't know each other," Raunak often said. "Back home, I was known by my name, by my face, by my stories. Here, I'm just another guy with a backpack."

He would often sit by the window of his hostel room at night, watching the lights flicker in the apartment towers across the road. Somewhere in those countless windows, lives were unfolding, but none that he was a part of. That distance, both physical and emotional, was hard to bridge.

"My friends and neighbors back home were like my family," he would say with a faint smile. "You know, people in small towns, they smile more. They wave when they pass by. They ask how your parents are doing; they offer you tea without asking. Here, it's all about appointments and screens."

He didn't hate the city. How could he? It was his stepping stone to everything he ever hoped for. But sometimes, like tonight, the noise in his head was louder than the music on the speakers. The movie held up a mirror showing him everything he had left behind and reminding him that in trying to gain something new, he hadn't yet figured out what that "something" really was.

As his friends joked about dinner plans, Raunak silently nodded, walking along. But inside, he was walking somewhere else entirely down memory lane, to the cricket field, to the neighbor auntie calling him in for snacks, to the small streets that somehow felt bigger than this giant city.

He had come here with dreams in his eyes. But tonight, all he wanted was a familiar hand on his shoulder and someone to say, "I missed you."

Just a few months ago, Raunak had moved to the metro city to pursue his higher education. He arrived with a suitcase full of clothes, a tiffin box his mother had packed with homemade snacks, and a head full of dreams that didn't yet have a name. He wasn't sure what he wanted to become, but someone important enough to buy groceries and clothes without checking price tags. All he knew was that he wanted more. More than what his small town could offer. A better life for himself and for the parents who had quietly given up their comforts for his.

But no one told him that ambition could be so lonely.

The move was thrilling at first. The sheer scale of the city made him feel like he was part of something big. The skyline stretched into infinity, the traffic buzzed with electricity, and the metro zipped by like a snake made of steel and light. But excitement quickly gave way to unease.

The pace was relentless. The accent was unfamiliar. The people around him didn't seem to notice one another. Everyone was in a hurry on the road, in the college corridors, and even in their conversations.

At times, Raunak felt like an outsider looking in, like he had mistakenly walked into someone else's movie and didn't know his lines. He tried to blend in, adjusting his jeans, mimicking the city slang, nodding even when he didn't understand. He made friends, yes, a few good ones, but even among them, he often felt alone. Like he was playing a version of himself that fit into their world.

"In my town, people know you by name," he would say with a smile that carried a trace of sadness. "Here, even neighbors don't look you in the eye."

He missed the simple gestures of home, the familiar 'namaste' from the corner shopkeeper, the postman who stopped by for a glass of water, the aunty next door who insisted on feeding him his favourite dishes because he looked too thin. In his town, conversations weren't scheduled; they happened over chai at the gate or while borrowing sugar.

Back home, his neighborhood felt like an extended family. If the electricity went out, kids would run into each other's homes with candles. If someone was sick, half the lane showed up with food and medicine. There was noise, chaos, community. Here in the city, his apartment floor stayed silent. He didn't even know the name of the girl who lived across from him.

So, when the semester ended or Diwali rolled around, Raunak made his way back home as fast as his student budget allowed. As soon as he stepped off the train, the air felt different, less polluted, more familiar. The tempo ride

from the station still played old Hindi songs. The man selling roasted peanuts still called him 'beta'. He would grin all the way to his lane, where his parents waited at the gate with a plate of sweets and wide smiles that made his heart ache with gratitude.

At home, everything slowed down. His mother's voice filled the kitchen and home. His father, who rarely talked over the phone, suddenly had endless things to share over evening walks. Raunak spent hours catching up with his old gang, meeting at their usual tea shop or under the ancient banyan tree near the school. They laughed like no time had passed, replaying old memories, teasing each other like they were still sixteen. They'd make plans, "We should all meet in the city next summer!" or "Let's do a trip to the hills together!" But somewhere, deep down, they all knew those plans would never materialize. Life would catch up. But they always hoped, they believed.

Raunak visited every food stall he had ever loved. The jalebi shop that fried sweets in front of you. The south Indian restaurant where the server remembered his order without asking. The tiny café with just two tables, but the best cold coffee in the world. He savored every bite, not just for the taste, but for the memory attached to it.

Each visit home filled him up in ways the city never could. His cheeks rounded out, his voice got louder, and his laugh came easier. His friends would joke that the glow on his face was from his mother's ghee-laden parathas, but Raunak knew it came from something deeper.

Home, to Raunak, wasn't just a place with a pin code. It was the smell of turmeric and mustard oil. It was the echo of his name being called from the street. It was being known truly, fully known.

It was, as he often told himself quietly, a rejuvenation center for the soul. A place that reminded him of who he really was, before the city tried to change him.

One evening, Raunak's college group decided to try a famous South Indian restaurant tucked inside a quaint cultural street of the city. It was one of those places people posted about on Instagram: brass lamps at the entrance, banana leaves etched onto the glass windows, and Carnatic music playing softly in the background. The warm glow of yellow lights made the place feel intimate, almost reverent. Rustic wooden tables, heavy bronze plates, and servers dressed in traditional veshtis added to the charm.

Raunak's eyes lit up the moment they entered. "This feels so authentic," he said softly, more to himself than to anyone else.

They sat at a corner table, flipping through a limited but carefully curated menu. Everyone was excited, placing varied orders: idiyappam, filter coffee, Pongal. Raunak, without hesitation, ordered his all-time favorite: Rava masala dosa.

The food began to arrive one by one. The aroma of ghee, the hiss of sambhar being poured, the clink of steel tumblers, it all built anticipation. Raunak tasted a bit of everything, smiling at his friends' reactions. "This is actually amazing," someone said with a mouthful of vada.

But Raunak waited. When the golden, crisp triangle of his Rava dosa finally arrived, garnished with coriander and paired with coconut chutney, his heart did a little flip. He tore a piece, dipped it gently into the chutney, and took the first bite. Something was off.

It wasn't bad. In fact, it was probably as authentic as it could get in this city. But it wasn't *his* taste. Not the one from his favourite restaurant back home, where the waiter knew exactly how much crisp he liked, how spicy the potato filling should be.

"Come to my city," Raunak said suddenly, putting his fork down. "I'll treat you to the best South Indian food you've ever had." His friends laughed. "But you don't live in South India." Raunak smiled, leaning back. "Just plan once, guys. Trust me."

But time passed.

The excitement of newness slowly gave way to the routine of survival. Raunak's finances grew tighter with every semester. While his classmates went out for weekend getaways, he took up side jobs teaching tuitions in the evening, translating documents for a little extra cash. Sleep became a luxury with study pressure as he took an extra course along. So did time.

Trips back home, once eagerly counted down to on calendar apps, came on waitlist. At first, it was just "not this month," then "maybe next semester," and eventually, "let's see when I get leave." His bag of homemade snacks arrived with acquaintances who happily agreed to deliver on the way, packed with handwritten notes from family and small packets of his favorite mixture, which he can't find in this big city.

After his master's degree, Raunak got a good job. It paid the bills, filled the fridge, and let him buy his parents their first smartphone. He upgraded his wardrobe, learned to navigate Excel sheets, and started drinking coffee as the budget now allowed.

Before he could visit his hometown, the pandemic hit. It was during lockdown he got married to his love Diya.

The city that had once swallowed him whole now stood still, frozen in silence and sirens. Raunak stayed indoors, working from his one-bedroom apartment, learning to cook simple meals with his wife, video calling his parents more than ever. His world, like everyone else's, had shrunk to four walls and a flickering screen. That pause gave him moments to think, but not quite enough to go back. He never got a chance.

When the world opened up again, life picked up like a song from the middle of the verse. Work, deadlines, digital meetings, salary slips. Days bled into nights. The longing for his hometown dulled not because he had stopped loving it, but because he no longer had time to miss it.

Still, the tales lived on. Lunch breaks at the office became storytelling sessions. Raunak would talk about local fairs, temples decorated with fairy lights during Diwali, the taste of sugarcane juice from the corner shop, and how everyone in his neighborhood knew when his exams ended. His colleagues, many from big cities, listened with interest. "Dear, Raunak, your town sounds like a movie set," one of them had said once. Raunak had just smiled, quietly tucking the compliment into his heart.

The city that had once overwhelmed him now felt familiar. The noise no longer bothered him. The speed didn't scare him. He had learned to walk with it, even run with it. His new apartment in a clean, gated complex felt right. "Less maintenance. No garden. No rain leakage," he'd tell himself, as if rationality could quiet nostalgia.

Even his parents had moved in with him first for a short visit, then slowly, permanently. The old house back in town now stood locked and still, like a frozen memory.

Raunak had changed.

But sometimes, when the power went out briefly during monsoons, and the ceiling fan fell silent, he'd sit by the window, hearing nothing but rain. And in that hush, if only for a second, he could smell wet soil and hear temple bells echoing in the distance. And it still made him ache a little.

One evening, just as Raunak was wrapping up work, his phone buzzed with a name he hadn't seen in years *Raj*. His childhood friend. The screen lit up with a voice note: "Getting married next month, brother! You *have* to come. It's in our hometown. No excuses."

Raunak paused.

He had already booked a trekking trip with colleagues for that same weekend, something he'd been looking forward to for months. But the moment he heard Raj's voice, something deep and quiet stirred within him. A familiar tug like an old tune suddenly playing on the radio. Diya convinced him to attend this wedding.

That night, he stared at the trek booking page. Then, without another thought, he canceled it. "I think this might be my last chance to visit home," he told a colleague the next morning while sipping his favourite cappuccino.

Instead of booking a quick flight, Raunak chose the train. He wanted the long journey, the hum of tracks, the vendors at stations, the Dhak flower forest, tunnels, a distant waterfall, the blurred countryside, everything. The slow return to the boy he had been.

From the moment he hit "confirm" on the ticket, his excitement grew. He spoke even more about his town to colleagues. "Green fields everywhere. People greet you with a smile. No honking. No rush," he'd say, chest swelling with pride.

The day he left, his teammates threw him a surprise lunch in the cafeteria. "Enjoy the wedding," someone teased. "And finally give us a break from your town tales!"

Later, caught in metro traffic on the way to the station, Raunak tapped his foot nervously. The train's departure time blinked in his mind like a ticking clock. "You must be new here. Small-town boy, I guess?" the cab driver asked as Raunak leapt out near the platform. Raunak nodded, panting, grinning. "Yes."

Settling into his train seat, he unwrapped a sandwich from the office canteen, his city comfort food. He had changed. But the ticket in his pocket still led to where he began.

It was a long journey, stretching across states and time zones of memory. Raunak had hoped to sleep through most of it, lulled by the rhythmic clatter of the train wheels. But somewhere in the early hours of the morning, a fellow passenger seated far down the aisle began playing loud music on his phone. Not through headphones, of course, but directly from the tiny speaker. A remix of film songs, echoing like a one-man concert hall.

Raunak turned in his seat, mildly irritated, but said nothing. It wasn't worth the hassle. After a while, he sat up and stretched. The berths smelled of iron and old upholstery. He rubbed his eyes and offered a small, sleepy smile to the other passengers around. A few smiled back

politely. One man kept scrolling on his phone, earphones plugged in, lost to the world.

During college, these train journeys had been different. Noisy, yes, but in the warm, familiar way. Groups of friends playing cards, aunties offering pickles and puris to neighbors, even a young couple whispering stories under shared shawls. Now, the silence was filled not with chatter, but with video reels and notifications.

A middle-aged family was seated across from him: father, mother, and two kids. As the morning stretched on, they unpacked their steel tiffin boxes with familiar clinks. The scent of puri and pickle filled the air. As they passed boxes among themselves, Raunak instinctively waved his hand with a polite “No, thank you,” only to realize, with a twinge of embarrassment, that they hadn’t offered him any.

Years ago, that gesture was instinctive too. He would refuse, and they’d insist. “Take a little. At least taste it!” Strangers didn’t remain strangers for long on those journeys. They became temporary families, bonded by meals and shared boredom. Now, even the rituals of kindness felt outdated. Maybe they’re from the city, he reasoned. Big-city folks don’t always share. Or maybe things have changed.

By noon, the train was delayed. The sun glared through the windows. Raunak had finished his book; a dog-eared novel he had read many times before. Bored, he began to pay attention to the little murmurs around him. People were starting conversations, as if the long hours had finally melted their guardedness. He leaned slightly toward the family beside him, pretending to look outside, but really listening. The father mentioned a street number *seven*, he said.

Raunak turned. "Sorry... did you say street seven? That's my neighborhood." The woman looked up, curious. "Oh? We moved there recently. Just two months ago. Do you still live there?" Raunak smiled faintly. "No, I grew up there. My parents lived in the white house with a swing. The one with the big neem tree."

The family exchanged a look, uncertain. "We don't know any white house or swing... I think we're on the other end. Do you know Mr. Kumar? He's our landlord." Raunak shook his head. "No. Doesn't ring a bell."

Something tightened in his chest.

He had once believed he knew every inch of that neighborhood, every bark of every dog, every rusted gate and unpaved path. But now, strangers lived there. They didn't know his father's name. They didn't know him. And suddenly, despite being just a few hours from home, Raunak felt farther away than ever before.

The train screeched into the station just as the golden hue of evening painted the sky. Raunak gathered his bag and stepped off slowly, his legs stiff from the long ride, but his heart racing with anticipation. His eyes immediately found the familiar station board *the same yellow backdrop, the black Devanagari letters*, slightly chipped at the corners, now faded with time and dust.

He stood still, letting the moment wrap around him. This was the same board he had seen years ago, when he used to go for short family trips, visit his relatives, and left his town for the first time. That day, his eyes were moist but hopeful. His mother had packed homemade snacks. His father had handed him a steel tiffin and said, "You are going to achieve big things." A few friends came to see him

off. That yellow board had seen his departure, his dreams, his silent promises.

“Nothing has changed,” he whispered with a nostalgic smile.

But as he turned, the smile faltered. Everything had changed.

There were escalators now, buzzing lifts, CCTV cameras, and LED signs blinking advertisements for malls and housing schemes. A chai counter was now a café kiosk offering lattes. The air smelled more of machines than monsoons. “Is this really my town?” he thought. Still dazed, he laughed softly and told a fellow traveler nearby, “First time I’m happy paying my taxes.” The man gave him a confused nod and walked off, busy on his phone.

As Raunak stepped outside the station gates, a wave of disorientation gripped him. His eyes darted in every direction. Where was the old paan shop that stood across the road? The little bench under the banyan tree where he once waited for friends? All gone. In their place stood a towering flyover, shops with glass facades, and rows of cars honking impatiently in a suffocating jam.

A traffic jam. In his town.

Raunak stood frozen. Raunak glanced back at the station sign, wondering for a moment if he had stepped off at the wrong stop. Everything looked different except that faded yellow board. It was the right station but the wrong city. Or so it felt.

With no one to receive him, his friend, caught up in wedding chaos, Raunak hesitantly booked a cab. It felt almost absurd. A cab in a place where cycle rickshaws and scooters were once the norm. As he sat back in the seat, his

eyes scanned the streets, hungry for a flicker of memory. A corner he could recognize. A wall with old graffiti. A familiar tree. But the city was unfamiliar, fast, polished, and distant.

The cab crawled through traffic, past neon signs and billboards. Big brands had taken over the food joints. His beloved *chaat shop* was now replaced by a Pizza outlet. People were glued to their screens, not waving or smiling. Kids were holding tablets, not kites. It wasn't that the city had grown. It had transformed. It had moved on.

And somewhere in that transformation, Raunak felt like a tourist in a place that once breathed his name. A place that no longer waited for him.

Raunak reached the wedding venue just as the sun dipped behind the city skyline. The house was buzzing with people, laughter, and music, but something felt distant. He was welcomed warmly by his friend's parents, who once knew him like their own. The mother cupped his face and said, "You've become so big," her eyes moist with memory. He smiled politely, but the weight of time between them was undeniable.

As he looked around, he realized most faces were unfamiliar. Once, he could walk into a wedding like this and know half the room by name. Now, he found himself scanning the crowd, hoping for a familiar face. Only a handful of their old gang showed up. People he had played cricket with every evening, who knew his family, his stories, his secrets. He had imagined a full-blown reunion, loud laughter, shared memories, someone pulling out old photos, but reality was quieter. And thinner.

That evening, they all sat together for a few drinks. It was meant to feel like old times. They talked about how

they missed “those days,” and someone even brought up a silly school incident. They laughed, but the laughter felt spaced out, delayed, like buffering memories.

Their lives had moved on in different directions, different cities, different jobs, different realities. One had kids. One was shifting abroad. Another was navigating a breakup.

They all wanted that old comfort back, but no one could quite grasp it. There were pauses between conversations that didn’t exist before. Inside jokes now require context. And suddenly, it struck Raunak: it wasn’t just the city that had changed. They all had.

He sipped his drink slowly, smiled at their effort, and let the silence settle between stories no one could finish.

The next morning brought with it a rare quietness. The main wedding ceremony was scheduled for the evening, so Raunak had some free time. Instead of staying indoors, he felt an urge, a deep, almost aching pull to visit his old neighbourhood. It had been years. Too many, maybe. He borrowed a two-wheeler from one of the guests and slipped into the city streets, like he used to do for years.

What began as a joyride soon became a confusing puzzle. The city had morphed. Roads were broader, and unfamiliar. Hoardings had changed. Familiar landmarks were replaced with modern cafés, clinics, or shiny new apartments. He rode slowly, cautiously, until he was forced to pull over near a petrol pump to open Maps on his phone, a surreal moment for someone who once knew every shortcut, every pothole, every tree by heart.

"Where am I?" he whispered under his breath, half-laughing, half-lost.

He followed the digital trail, though his memory kept interrupting: *Didn't there used to be a temple here? Wasn't this corner where the rickshaw stand was?* He remembered stopping for orange ice candies with his friends here. That shop was gone too. Swallowed whole by time. Eventually, he reached his old street.

At first, he didn't recognise it. The narrow by-lanes had transformed into broad walking paths, the mud lanes now replaced by smooth tiles. A jogging park had replaced the vacant plot where kids once played cricket. Houses had grown taller, and cars were everywhere, parked on street. The charm of chaos was gone, everything was planned, polished but less green.

He rode slowly, scanning the houses. When he finally located what used to be his home, he almost didn't believe it. The façade had changed, painted fresh, with new grills and flower pots lining the balcony. He parked the scooter a little distance away and decided to take a walk, more to digest his emotions than anything else.

The street was oddly silent for a morning. A few children cycled past him without a glance. A man watered his plants with earbuds in, oblivious to Raunak's presence. There was no familiar face to wave at him, no aunty calling him in for tea, no uncle asking about his studies.

He sat down on a bench in the new jogging park that now stood where wild grass once grew. Time stretched. He waited.

In his mind, he could still hear the echoes of his childhood, his mother calling him in the evening, the sound of steel tiffin boxes opening during lunch breaks, the scolding from neighbours when their cricket ball hit a window.

But the present was quiet.

People had moved. Some to bigger cities. Some to different countries. Some... were no longer in this world.

Raunak waited a little longer, hoping someone, anyone, would pass by and recognise him. Or maybe he would spot someone he could call out to.

Just as he stood to leave, a voice called out, "Raunak?" He turned instantly, heart thudding with sudden hope, eyes scanning for a friend, a face from the past. And then he saw him, the man from the train journey, waving with a kind smile. Raunak smiled faintly, masking his disappointment. "Oh! Hi again," he said, walking toward the man.

The acquaintance patted his back. "Small world, isn't it? I live just a few houses from here. Thought I saw you earlier, but wasn't sure."

They exchanged a few pleasantries, spoke briefly about the wedding, the city's development, and the weather. But it was all surface-level. Raunak kept hoping for more. Something deeper. A connection. A memory. But none came. After a few minutes, Raunak excused himself.

He walked back to his old house once more, this time slower. He took a deep breath and touched the gate. It felt cold, unfamiliar.

With a heavy heart, he turned away. The streets that once held his dreams, his innocence, now felt like a photo album of someone else he was flipping through. As he rode away, the sun shimmered on the concrete, casting long shadows. He felt lighter and heavier all at once.

This city was his past. Perhaps it no longer belonged to him.

The wedding was beautiful, grand yet intimate, filled with rituals that once felt familiar and songs that echoed childhood memories. Raunak watched his friend step into a new life and couldn't help but remember the games they used to play in the school courtyard, or the cycle rides that ended with mangoes stolen from the same tree. Time had flown.

That evening, as the celebrations wound down and the final dhol beats faded into the night, the old group of friends gathered in a quiet corner with paper plates full of sweets and half-finished drinks. They laughed, clicked a few selfies, and once again made ambitious plans for a group reunion, maybe a road trip, a wedding anniversary meet, or just "a weekend somewhere far from work and noise."

But everyone knew the truth. Priorities had changed. Life had moved on. Some had wives waiting at home. Others had deadlines to catch. Their cities had changed them sometimes in ways they couldn't even express. Still, they made those promises, if only to preserve the illusion that nothing had changed between them.

As the final goodbyes were said and people started to leave, Raunak stood quietly for a moment, watching the lights dim at the venue. The laughter, the music, the colors, they all felt slightly out of sync with the ache in his heart. This wasn't just a farewell to a wedding; it was a quiet nod to the realization that some things wouldn't ever be the same again.

Then he looked down at the hand baggage he was carrying, the return gift from the wedding. It hadn't fit in his small suitcase. As he unwrapped it absentmindedly, he

discovered something that pulled him back: an assortment of sweets and snacks from his favorite childhood shop.

His eyes welled up. Maybe, just maybe, there was time for one more stop before his flight.

Raunak had the whole day to himself before his evening flight. A small part of him still hoped to meet someone, anyone he once knew on the streets, in the market, or maybe at one of the places that used to feel like an extension of home.

On impulse, he decided to visit one of the city's most iconic eateries, a restaurant that had once been a favorite of his, known not just for its food but for the feeling it carried: warmth, chatter, familiarity. He remembered the Chinese served in melamine bowls, the raspy voice of the cashier uncle, and the laughter of children outside playing while their parents waited for a table.

As he reached the place, he paused in front of it. The name was the same, but it glowed on a new, backlit board in sleek English font. It was no longer painted by hand like it used to be. The building had been renovated. The rustic, rugged entrance was now polished glass, with a security guard holding open the door.

He stepped inside. The decor was completely transformed, modern and elegant. Soft music played in the background. The lights were warm and carefully placed, highlighting corners with indoor plants and gold-accented furniture. There were polished wooden floors, shimmery cream curtains replacing the old maroon ones, and an aesthetic that screamed Instagram-worthy.

By all standards, it was beautiful. It was everything he used to look for in restaurants back in the metro city. But

here, it felt off, like seeing an old friend dressed in unfamiliar clothes, speaking in a new accent.

He took a side table meant for two, instinctively. It was a habit from the past, back when he used to come here with college friends, laughing too loudly and staying too long. In a small town like his, people rarely dined alone. Families came in groups. Couples occupied center tables. Friends filled the corners.

But Raunak was the only one sitting alone.

A few customers glanced at him, curious but indifferent. No one recognized him. No familiar nods, no warm smiles of acknowledgment. Back in the day, Raunak used to purposely choose corner seats just to avoid the endless greetings and small talk with every second person who knew him or his family. Now, in the centre seat, he sat unnoticed.

His heart couldn't accept that this was the same place.

As he looked around, he noticed the wall that once displayed family pictures, awards, and newspaper clippings was now replaced by abstract art in minimalist frames. The earthy aroma of sambhar had given way to the sharp smell of brewed coffee and lemon-scented candles. It looked beautiful but... Curated, not lived-in. He knew he should be happy. This was growth, development, progress. But his heart ached.

He had longed for such aesthetics in the city he now called home. But here, in this space once filled with laughter and memory, they made him feel like an outsider.

It wasn't the place that had changed alone. It was him too.

It had only been a few minutes, but to Raunak, it felt like eternity. The air was strange, not hostile but unfamiliar. A restaurant once echoing with warm laughter and loud greetings now felt distant, almost cold. Everyone around him looked polished, preoccupied, and perfectly placed in their world. Not one familiar face passed by. Not a single knowing glance met his. His fingers tapped nervously on the edge of the polished wooden table. A silence, more deafening than the metro city's traffic, began to take shape inside him.

Raunak slowly stood up, adjusting his chair with that unspoken sadness of a plan falling short. He didn't want anything. What could he eat that would taste like home when everything felt foreign?

But just as he was about to turn, a voice stopped him. A warm, weathered voice, fragile yet confident, like a thread connecting him to his past.

"Son, would you like your usual order?" the old waiter asked gently, placing a glass of cool water, but not cold, in front of him with quiet care.

Raunak froze, stunned. The glass trembled a little in his hand as he picked it up. He hadn't realized how parched he was physically and emotionally. He looked up. The man's eyes crinkled with a smile, one that wasn't performative or polite. It was genuine. Familiar.

Raunak's chest loosened, like he had been holding his breath ever since he stepped off that train. A wave of comfort washed over him. "Yes," he whispered, with a broad smile that reached his eyes, a rare thing these days.

Minutes later, a steaming plate of dosa arrived, the exact kind he used to order during school days. Crispy

edges, soft center, coconut chutney on the side, and the signature sambar that tasted like no other. He took the first bite slowly, almost reverently.

And just like that, something shifted.

It was the same dosa. Not just in taste, but in memory. It didn't just fill his stomach; it filled a void. For those few moments, he wasn't the lost adult trying to reclaim a past. He was just Raunak, again a boy who once believed that home would always remain the same.

The chaos in his head softened, like a fog lifting briefly. But when the plate was empty, and the magic of the moment faded, Raunak stood up once again, not with the satisfaction of a man who had revisited home, but with the ache of someone who knew that home had quietly moved on without him.

He paid at the counter, nodded at the waiter, his only anchor in a sea of unfamiliarity, and stepped out. There were no new memories made. Just a lingering taste of what once was. A flicker of comfort in a rapidly vanishing world.

As he walked toward his cab, the streets didn't seem quite so overwhelming anymore. But the heaviness hadn't gone. It had only taken a new shape: acceptance.

"The city was supposed to change," he thought. "That was inevitable. Growth, development, new faces, new buildings, these were signs of progress." But what he hadn't anticipated was how much he had changed.

He wasn't the boy who left with a dream and a steel tiffin box. He was now a man of schedules, flights, passwords, and emails. A man of takeaways and not tiffin boxes packed from home. A man who had learned to live

with distance between people, between feelings, and between homes.

For years, he hadn't found a real reason to return. Life in the city had kept him occupied, then consumed, and then somewhat lost. Yet, a tiny part of him always hoped he'd come back to settle here someday, retire here, rediscover that sense of belonging.

But today made it clear that the version of 'here' no longer existed. And maybe, it never really did. Maybe it was always changing, and he just wasn't watching closely enough.

He looked up at the evening sky. A quiet sun was setting behind the new high-rises. He didn't have a place he could point to and call home anymore.

But maybe, someday, he would. A place that didn't just exist in memory, but in presence. A place that welcomed the new version of Raunak, not just the boy he once was.

The place was meant to change, was meant to grow. It was Raunak who was supposed to grow along, but now he was a different person from a different city. And maybe, just maybe, that was okay.

Change is okay.

Black Coffee without Sugar

The café sat at the quieter end of a bustling shopping street, a modest establishment almost hidden behind an unruly tangle of pink bougainvillea. It wasn't just a place to grab coffee; it was the kind of corner you stumbled into and never wanted to leave. A refuge from the glare of storefront lights and hurried footsteps. The sign above the entrance had faded with time, its once-bold and flashy letters now a gentle whisper to those who already knew it was there.

Golden sunlight draped across the cobbled path like spilled honey, catching the petals of the bougainvillea and scattering dappled shadows across the glass. Inside, the air carried a mix of roasted beans, vanilla wax from the nearby table candle, and the warm musk of well-thumbed books. The walls were lined with wooden shelves, crooked in places, bearing volumes of poetry, travelogues, and old magazines from another decade. Mismatched mugs hung from hooks like old friends, some chipped or faded, but beloved.

From a vintage speaker near the counter, slow jazz trickled out, soft trumpet notes and a husky saxophone turning minutes into memories. The music didn't demand attention; it filled the air like a familiar scent, comforting and constant.

At one corner, a young man scribbled in a notebook, brow furrowed. At another, two old friends sat in the hush of shared silence, letting their mugs grow cold while memories did the talking. A lady draped in bright silk was sitting alone, reading and enjoying her own company. The café was alive not with noise, but with the gentle hum of presence, the people living their lives slowly, on purpose.

And then the door opened with the chiming of a small brass bell. In came a burst of laughter, light and lively, followed by the entrance of five women each in her own rhythm, yet all moving with the harmony of familiarity. They were a walking spectrum of generations, bound not just by blood but by the ease of long-standing relationships. The youngest, Ridhi, rushed in first, her sandals slapping against the wood floor, her eyes already searching for the coldest drink. Behind her, Mishka and Myra entered shoulder to shoulder, their teenage postures wrapped in a soft rebellion. Sarika followed, elegance in motion, and finally, Rima brought up the rear steady, grounded, and carrying a gaze that seemed to hold both wisdom and weariness.

The server, recognizing a family reunion when he saw one, guided them to the round table by the window, the one half-hidden by bougainvillea and drenched in sunlight. It was the perfect spot. A perfect metaphor for the circle of life.

Rima smiled faintly as she pulled out her chair. This place, she thought, had a way of reminding her that time didn't always need to rush. Sometimes, it simply brewed slowly, like a good cup of coffee.

The café seemed to hush in appreciation as the five of them settled in. Rima took her seat last, with the kind of

grace that came from a life of keeping others steady before herself. She adjusted the strap of her beloved bag, a worn, brown beauty, one that had seen better days but still held its shape, much like her. It was the same bag she'd carried through airports, school meetings, hospital lobbies, and grocery runs. Today, it held a scarf, a slim notebook, and a small gift for her beloved partner she found during the shopping spree.

Sarika chose the chair beside her. There was a quiet strength about her, softened by a silk scarf tied around her ponytail, a minimalist black watch, and the faintest trace of kajal lining her eyes. Her phone buzzed briefly, but she silenced it with a touch that said, 'not now'. Today was about them.

Myra and Mishka Rima's daughters plopped into their chairs with the practiced ease of girls who'd grown up being told to behave in public spaces, and had now learned just how far they could push the limits. Myra, the elder one, scanned the café with an appraising eye. A third-year literature student, she was the kind who annotated books and people in equal measure. A silver ring glinted on her index finger, spinning absent-mindedly as she settled in. Beside her, Mishka leaned back with casual rebellion, sunglasses still perched atop her head like she had stepped out of a fashion shoot. She had only recently turned thirteen and wore her new status like a badge of grown-up pride.

And then there was Ridhi, the youngest, the most wide-eyed, and the loudest of the bunch. She was seven but often tried to act older, especially when around Myra and Mishka. She tugged at her mother Sarika's sleeve, already bursting with anticipation over what she would order. Her cheeks were still pink from the sun, and the braid at the

back of her head had started unraveling, strands curling rebelliously like her questions.

The five of them, across three generations, carried stories that wove in and out of each other like threads in an old tapestry. The trip had been Sarika's idea of a family vacation before life got busier again. The men had taken the opportunity to retreat to the poolside with beers and cricket scores, relieved to be momentarily excused from shopping expeditions and price haggling. That freedom had come at the modest price of carrying shopping bags later and treating the family to a fancy dinner before the trip ended, but it was a deal they made gladly.

Rima looked around the table, her eyes resting for a moment on each face. She remembered when Sarika first came into the family, shy, unsure, wearing a lavender kurta, a silver watch with a distinct blue dial, and an expression of nervous hope. And now she was here, running a small but thriving fashion boutique, raising Ridhi with a clarity Rima admired.

She looked at Myra and Mishka, how quickly time had turned them from toddlers clinging to her dupatta into young women with opinions and playlists and ambitions. She still remembered Myra's first poem, written on the back of a napkin during a summer trip to the hills. Mishka, on the other hand, had always been a whirlwind, bright, intense, slightly unpredictable, like monsoon weather.

And then there was Ridhi, her namesake. Raj had insisted on naming his daughter after the sister who had held his hand through the hardest parts of their childhood. When their parents fought and forgot about dinner, it was Rima who fed him. When he failed his math paper in ninth grade, it was Rima who spent sleepless nights teaching him

equations she barely understood herself. When he fell in love with Sarika, it was Rima who faced their disapproving parents and spoke for love over legacy. She had been a sister, a parent, a counselor, and often the unspoken glue that held everyone together.

“Can we order now? I’m dying,” Mishka whined, flopping onto the table dramatically. The moment broke, and laughter followed.

“I swear you were dying five minutes ago, too,” Myra teased, flipping her braid over one shoulder. “Maybe I’m just a ghost,” Mishka retorted, pulling her sunglasses down like a movie villain. Sarika shook her head with a smile. “If ghosts wear glitter sneakers, we’re doomed.”

The server arrived just then, menu in hand, and Rima smiled at him in thanks. He was young, probably in college, with that eager-to-please expression common to part-time café workers. Ridhi immediately pounced.

“One mango shake with lots of ice cream, please!” she chirped, barely able to contain her grin.

“Make that a Coke for me,” Mishka added, sounding more grown-up than usual.

Myra took her time, as if every menu item had to audition for her approval. “Strong cold coffee,” she finally decided. “Blended with ice cream. And whipped cream on top.”

Sarika glanced around the table and then said calmly, “Flat white for me.”

And then, the server turned to Rima. She didn’t even glance at the menu.

“One black coffee, without sugar,” she said, her voice firm but gentle. As he paused, she added with a knowing smile, “Espresso, not Americano.”

He nodded quickly and left.

Sarika leaned toward her, amused. “You really gave up cappuccino for that?” Rima looked out the window, watching the sunlight shift. “You gave up lattes. People change.”

The orders arrived on a sleek wooden tray, carried carefully by the young server who now seemed slightly nervous under the weight of everyone’s chatter. But the moment the tray touched down, the table hushed with collective awe. There was something about beautifully presented drinks, the gleam of glass, the swirl of cream, the faint clink of ice cubes, that made even the most familiar beverage feel like a small celebration.

Ridhi’s mango shake looked like a childhood dream, thick, sunny yellow with a generous crown of melting vanilla ice cream, dripping slowly down the sides. A bright red straw stuck out at an angle, promising instant delight. She clapped her hands once as if congratulating herself.

Mishka’s Coke fizzed audibly, bubbles clinging to the ice and floating upward like they were trying to escape the glass. She sipped it with the smugness of a teenager who had just been given permission to break a rule.

Myra’s cold coffee was art, a layered swirl of espresso, cream, and frothy delight, dusted lightly with cocoa. She leaned in and took a photo before even tasting it.

Sarika’s flat white was simple, no fuss. A warm ceramic cup, the milk poured with care into the espresso to create a delicate leaf pattern on top. She cradled it between her

palms, the warmth soaking into her skin like a silent reassurance.

And then there was Rima's espresso served in a tiny white cup on an even tinier saucer, unadorned and unapologetic. No cream, no sugar, no decoration. Just the drink itself, dark and pure. It sat quietly on the table, demanding no attention but earning it anyway.

As everyone took their first sips, Rima tapped her spoon gently against the rim of her cup. The soft chime brought their heads up. She smiled, not with command but with invitation.

"Can I say something?" "Let's talk," she said. "Not about shopping, or gossip, or the neighbor's daughter's wedding. Let's talk about life. Through coffee."

The younger girls giggled, but Sarika tilted her head in curiosity. Everyone looked up, even Ridhi, with cookie crumbs dotting her lips.

"I want you to describe your drinks," Rima began. "Start with you, Ridhi."

Ridhi licked a bit of cream from her upper lip and beamed. "It's so yummy! Sweet and cold and fun!"

"Refreshing?"

"Yup."

"And healthy?" Rima asked.

"No way," Mishka said before Ridhi could answer. "You'd turn into a mango!" The table laughed, and even Ridhi giggled.

Rima smiled. "Not for adults. But for kids, it's good. Like the always sweet-sugary people in our lives, fun to be

around, but too much of them, and you end up with a sugar crash. Nice to meet once in a while, but not the kind who builds your life.”

Sarika’s eyes softened. She understood. The metaphor was blossoming.

“When we’re children, we love those who are sweet to us. Who never says no. But not everyone who’s kind to us adds value. Sometimes, the ones who guide us, who say the tough things, we see them as bitter. But the desert doesn’t bloom with sweetness. It needs strength. It needs the people who challenge us.”

Mishka perked up. “Like my Coke! Fizzy and fun!” “Exactly,” Rima said. “Teenage is a Coke phase. Fizzy, exciting, loud. We love the noise, the thrill. We aren’t thinking about sugar or future cavities. We live in the now. It’s electric.”

Sarika nodded slowly, her fingers tightening around her cup.

“Fizzing!” Mishka said, lifting her glass for a noisy sip. “It makes my tongue feel weird. I love it!” “Of course you do,” Rima smiled. “You’re in the fizz phase. Teenagers are all about the bubbles, fun, unpredictable, full of energy. Everything feels intense. Friends matter more than rules. We fall in love with the sparkle, not realizing how quickly the fizz fades.”

Myra rolled her eyes. “She’s twelve, not a philosopher.” “Thirteen,” Mishka corrected proudly.

Rima gave them both a look. “Don’t worry, your turn is next.” She gestured toward Myra’s carefully curated glass. “Tell me. What does it feel like, drinking that?”

Myra took a slow sip and sighed, pleased. "It's the perfect mix. Bitter and sweet. Strong and soft. It feels... layered."

"Exactly," Rima said. "That's your twenties. That's early adulthood. We start seeing the real taste of life. We know there's bitterness, but we still want it masked. We add cream, sweetness, froth. We make it look beautiful. Even when it's heavy, we want it to look light. We're not ready to drink it straight."

"You still want sweetness, but now it's curated. A bit of ice cream to mask the bitterness of caffeine. Something fancy on top. We begin to care about how our drink looks, not just how it tastes. We're worried about opinions, but also learning to assert our own."

"And then?" Myra asked, curious despite herself. She looked at her cup again, suddenly thoughtful.

"Then comes acceptance." Sarika stirred her Flat White gently. "Like me."

Rima nodded. "You moved from sweet frothy drinks to a bold, balanced one. You still see life clearly, but with a touch of elegance. Flat White is the middle ground, mature, but not severe." She continued. "A person who knows how to appreciate strength but still needs a little softness to balance it. It's warm, comforting, and deep. You're raising a child. Running a business. You've seen hardship and handled it with grace."

Sarika bowed her head, humbled.

"So why espresso?" Myra asked again.

Rima sat back. Her fingers wrapped gently around the small cup. "When you start living without filters. When you

don't need cream to swallow the truth. When you accept life as it is. Pure. Potent. Undiluted. That's black coffee without sugar."

"No sugar, no foam, no disguise. Life, as it is. It's bitter, yes. But it's also real. And once you've acquired the taste, there's nothing purer."

"Sounds... lonely," Mishka said.

"No," Rima replied. "It's freeing. You don't judge others because you've judged yourself. You've tasted bitterness and still found peace. That's maturity, not the loss of joy, but the rise of understanding."

The table was quiet.

Mishka wrinkled her nose. "I still don't get how you drink that stuff." Rima smiled. "One day, you might."

The gentle hum of the café returned jazz notes flowing like soft whispers, a breeze lifting the scent of coffee and something cinnamon from the counter. Outside, the bougainvillea fluttered in the sunlight, bright pink against an otherwise slow afternoon.

Inside, at that corner table surrounded by stories, something tender was unfolding. The cups were no longer just beverages; they were extensions of lives lived in different gears, on different timelines, shaped by different choices.

Rima placed her small espresso cup back onto the saucer. The sound of ceramic against ceramic echoed slightly, drawing their eyes again.

"We've all been sipping life in different forms," she began. "But the truth is, we don't get to choose only one."

Life makes us drink from every cup, at some point or another.”

She turned to Sarika first. “Do you remember the first time you came to our home before your wedding? You were barely twenty-two. Myra was so small, and I was juggling my job and home loan EMI. You were so quiet then, so unsure of your place.”

“You were living on iced coffee”, both giggled.

Sarika nodded. “I was scared. Everything was new. Your house, your rules, your kindness... everything felt like an exam hall. But you didn’t judge me. You gave me space.”

“You grew,” Rima said gently. “From a girl who cried in the storeroom after burning rice, to a woman who convinced our father to invest in your boutique. You built something, not just for yourself, but for Ridhi too. That’s your flat white phase. Full-bodied, warm, with enough courage to taste the espresso underneath but with softness that keeps you grounded.”

Sarika’s eyes misted, but she held Rima’s gaze and smiled. “You always saw me before I saw myself.” Rima’s hand reached across the table and gave hers a brief squeeze before moving on.

“And you,” she said, turning to Myra, “you’re living in the space between dreams and deadlines.” Myra’s head tilted slightly.

“You’re trying to figure out who you are,” Rima continued. “A little bitter, a little sweet. You want to be original, but you still care about what others think. You write poetry that no one sees and spend hours rewriting Instagram captions for the ones people will. It’s okay.

That's what this time is for. To froth up your ideas, blend your thoughts, and figure out what you really want to taste."

Myra gave a slow nod, her expression thoughtful. "Sometimes I feel like I'm faking it. Like everyone else has it figured out but me." "No one has it figured out," Sarika said. "We just learn how to drink what life serves us, without making a face," Rima added. They laughed at that.

"And you, Mishka," Rima smiled, turning to the youngest teenager. "Your Coke is fizzing now. Everything's exciting. Everything's a reaction. Friends, music, crushes, Insta. But remember, that fizz fades fast. Learn to enjoy it, but don't build your life on it."

"I won't," Mishka said seriously, as if she had made a promise she intended to keep.

"And Ridhi," Rima said, lowering her voice just slightly, "you're in the mango shake phase, where everyone loves you just for being sweet. But one day, someone won't. And you'll wonder why. That's when you'll need to know who you are underneath the ice cream and syrup. That's when the real you will start to bloom." Ridhi nodded, though perhaps she didn't fully understand. But she sensed it was important, and so she tucked the moment away like a secret in her heart.

Sarika cleared her throat softly. "So, what about you, Rima di? Why espresso? Why now?"

Rima sat back in her chair, hands in her lap, gaze distant for a moment. "Because I've had the sugar, and the fizz, and the cream. I've had my share of decoration. But I'm done disguising life. I want it as it is. Strong. Small. Direct." She took a breath.

"I spent most of my life pleasing people: parents, coworkers, family. I was the dependable one. The quiet one. The background of everyone else's celebration. And I don't regret it. But somewhere along the way, I stopped asking myself what I wanted."

Myra leaned in. "And what do you want now?"

Rima looked up, her eyes clear. "Peace. Truth. A life that doesn't need to be dressed up for approval. I want to read in silence. Drink my coffee. Go for walks alone. Speak only when I mean to. And love only what is real." There was a weight in her words, but it wasn't heavy. It was grounding.

"You know what's funny?" she added. "Black coffee is supposed to be bitter. But once you're used to it, everything else feels fake. Once you've lived a life stripped of excuses and masks, it's hard to go back to sweet lies."

The table fell into a silence that wasn't awkward. It was sacred. Like the quiet that follows prayer. In that moment, they weren't niece and aunt, mother and daughter, sister and friend. They were simply women, meeting each other across timelines of shared truth.

Then Mishka, in the way only teenagers can, broke the spell. "So basically," she said, sipping her Coke loudly, "you're saying I should enjoy being fizzy while I still can."

"Exactly," Rima said, smiling. "And one day, when you don't fizz anymore, you'll find your own favorite flavor."

As the laughter faded, what lingered was not the noise but the closeness it had stirred. The café, a silent witness to this swirl of emotions, seemed to lean in around them, walls hugging the warmth, air vibrating with a softness that only honesty can bring.

Sarika was the first to speak again, but this time her voice had dropped a layer, moving from light to reflective. “You know,” she said, stirring the last sip of her flat white, “I spent so long trying to become the perfect wife, the perfect mother. I didn’t even know what kind of coffee I actually liked until a few years ago. With time, I always just ordered what Raj did.”

Rima looked at her with knowing eyes. “And now?”

“Now,” Sarika said, smiling, “I order what I want, even if it costs more. Even if it’s just for me. And sometimes, that’s my little rebellion.” Rima chuckled softly. “It’s not rebellion, Sarika. It’s recognition. Of self.”

Myra was picking at the chocolate shavings stuck to the side of her glass with the back of her spoon. “What if you never figure it out?” she asked suddenly. “What if you always feel like you’re just trying on different versions of yourself, hoping one fits?”

“That’s part of the process,” Rima said gently. “Even the masks we wear teach us something. But eventually, you stop dressing for the world and start showing up in your skin. That’s when you’ll know.”

Myra exhaled slowly, as if letting go of something heavy she didn’t know she was holding. She didn’t speak again, but she smiled quietly, like someone who’d been seen.

Mishka was still sipping her Coke with the focused joy of youth, but even she seemed to understand now that her drink was more than just a treat. It was a moment in time. A permission slip for now, not forever.

“Does it get easier?” Myra asked after a while, her voice softer this time. “Life?”

“No,” Rima said, not unkindly. “But you get better at living it. Not everything becomes lighter, but you become stronger. And when you stop resisting what is, life stops fighting you.”

There was silence again. Not the kind that begged to be broken, but the kind that invited reflection.

A few tables away, the young woman with an Americano who had been sitting alone with a paperback novel closed her book gently and looked up. Her gaze had landed on Rima more than once during the conversation, her eyes flickering with interest and recognition. Now, when their eyes met, she raised her cup ever so slightly. It wasn’t a toast. It was an acknowledgment. A silent “I heard you.”

Rima returned the gesture with a small nod, and in that one exchange between strangers, something profound passed through the air: the way women understand each other without needing words. The way pain and peace wear the same face when shared honestly.

Back at the table, Ridhi was doodling on a napkin with a sugar packet, drawing uneven hearts and stick figures. She looked up, her innocence still untouched by the heavier things the adults carried.

“Does that mean I can drink mango shake forever?” she asked hopefully.

Everyone laughed again, but this time it wasn’t just amusement; it was love.

Rima leaned over and touched her nose lightly. “You drink mango shake for as long as it makes your heart happy, sweetheart. Just remember to try other things too. Even if they don’t excite you at first. Just try.” Ridhi looked

doubtful, but nodded. Childhood has a way of agreeing to things it doesn't fully believe yet.

The server returned quietly to clear a few empty cups, placing a small white envelope on the table with their bill. He smiled politely, then turned to the next table.

The woman with the Americano was leaving. As she passed, she paused beside Rima's chair and spoke just loud enough for only her to hear. "That was beautiful," she said. "Thank you."

Rima looked up. "For what?" "For reminding me not to add sugar to everything," the woman said with a wink, then disappeared through the bougainvillea-framed doorway. It was such a small moment. But it stayed with Rima long after.

The late afternoon light had softened into something more golden, more honeyed, like it too had settled in to listen. The shadows stretched lazily across the café floor as the vintage jazz continued its elegant wander through the room. Outside, the shopping lane had quieted, the earlier chaos now replaced with the unhurried rhythm of the evening.

Rima checked the time. "We should go," she said softly, though none of them moved right away. Their cups were nearly empty, their spirits full.

Mishka groaned theatrically. "Can we come here every day?"

"Only if your fizz doesn't run out," Myra teased, nudging her arm.

"Or if the cookies stay this good," Ridhi added with a grin, crumbling the last of hers between her fingers.

Sarika was gathering her things, her scarf, her sunglasses, the little leather-bound notebook she always carried for ideas she was too shy to call dreams. She looked around the café one last time. "This place," she said. "It's like... it knows how to hold stories. Like the walls remember everyone who's ever sat here."

"They do," Rima said. "Places like this don't just serve coffee. They preserve moments. Emotions. Turning points." She stood slowly, leaving her empty espresso cup behind. It looked tiny, almost fragile, yet the weight it had carried that afternoon felt eternal.

As they filed out, five women across generations, the waitress at the counter waved with a genuine smile. "See you again, ladies?"

"Absolutely," Myra said with an exaggerated wink. "We've got more drinks and more metaphors left in us."

Outside, the sun was casting amber streaks through the bougainvillea, which now framed the café like a storybook illustration. The street buzzed again with people, but their pace seemed less urgent, or perhaps the girls had simply begun to walk more slowly.

At the edge of the street, where a street musician had begun strumming a tune on a worn guitar, the group paused. Rima glanced back at the café, its windows glowing with the soft amber of indoor lamps. The silhouette of a new customer at the window, a young man reading with coffee in hand, was now being etched into its memory.

"Funny how a cup of coffee can become a whole philosophy," Myra said.

"Or a whole therapy session," Sarika added. Rima didn't reply. She simply smiled.

There was a fullness in her chest, not unlike love, not unlike grief, but most of all, it felt like peace. She wasn't hurrying toward the next thing. She wasn't carrying everyone else's weight. She was just walking. With her people. With herself. And that was enough.

They turned down the street, their laughter fading behind them like the final notes of a beautiful song.

Back inside the café, the server cleared their table. He paused at Rima's cup, studied the untouched sugar packet beside it, and smiled to himself. Then he tucked the sugar back into the holder.

Some cups don't need sweetening.

A Season of Rose

Diya stood in front of the mirror, her hands trembling ever so slightly as she adjusted the pleats of her yellow saree for the third time. It wasn't just any yellow; it was the kind that shimmered under light like liquid gold, bright enough to hide the storm brewing inside her chest. The silk clung to her frame like a second skin, flawless and intentional. Every fold was a prayer for strength. Every tuck, a desperate act of control in a life, she felt, was slowly slipping out of her hands.

Her hair was wound into a tight, elegant bun, each strand pinned to perfection, not a single wisp out of place. It made her look regal. Unshakable. Like a woman who had it all together. But if one looked closely, beneath the smooth shell of foundation and the fierce sweep of kohl, there were the quiet cracks of anxiety swimming in her eyes, like tides crashing behind a painted smile.

As Diya reached for her earrings, her eyes caught a subtle glint from the corner of the drawer a rose gold hairpin, delicately shaped like a blooming rose, its petals dusted with tiny diamonds. Raunak had gifted it to her the day he proposed, whispering, "*For the most precious flower in my life.*" Back then, she had worn it with pride, with love. But today, she hesitated. The pin felt too distant, too ornate for the woman she had become. She closed the drawer

slowly. It didn't feel like hers anymore. Or maybe... she no longer felt like *her* anymore.

She wore her *jhumkas*, oversized, silver-gold ones with little mirrors that caught the light every time she moved. They were heavy, but not heavier than the thoughts sitting in her mind. With every sway, they whispered reminders of who she once was. A dozen glass bangles clinked on her wrist, bright, beautiful, fragile. Just like her.

From afar, she looked like the heroine of a television drama, the kind who walks in slow motion, camera zooming in on the twist of her expression, the glint of her earrings, the turn of her heels. Indeed, her life was also turning into a daily soap. The kind of woman people watched and envied. But no one ever saw what lay beneath the costume.

As she added a final stroke of sindoor into the parting of her hair, she caught her reflection again and, for a second, didn't recognize herself. Who was this woman wrapped in yellow and silence? When did she become so rehearsed?

She'd married Raunak, believing love was enough to light a forever. Back then, she was wild-eyed, spontaneous, unapologetically herself. Today, she was layered in the role of a wife, hiding her vulnerability behind eyeliner and routine. Her lipstick was bold, like she needed the red to speak for her when her voice would fail.

Her heart thudded as she reached for her purse. Today wasn't just another day. She was about to meet someone she'd never thought she'd face. The woman from Raunak's past. Or worse, the ghost of her past.

She inhaled deeply. Held it. Let it go slowly. A ritual she had learned to steady herself before every storm.

While she looked like she was stepping out for a celebration, she was walking straight into a confrontation. And yet, every part of her appearance had a purpose not to impress, but to remind herself: she was still here. Still standing. Still worth something.

As she turned to leave, her eyes caught the edge of the mirror once more.

“Act like the main character,” she whispered under her breath, almost like a mantra.

And with one last flick of her pallu, Diya stepped out not just dressed to meet someone but dressed to face her truth.

Ten years. She had been married to Raunak for ten years. A love marriage was so rare, so rebellious at the time. She remembered the thrill of it all: stolen glances, late-night phone calls, the quiet defiance against skeptical relatives. Back then, it felt like nothing could ever come between them.

But something had.

Lately, Raunak had grown quiet. Not the comforting kind of silence that married couples share after knowing each other's rhythms, but the kind that leaves you feeling alone even in a room full of memories. He smiled, but the warmth was gone. He answered her questions, but never asked his own. His presence was constant, yet distant, like a ghost haunting their shared life.

At first, Diya dismissed it. Maybe it was work stress. Maybe he was tired. Maybe, maybe, maybe...

But then came the sleepless nights. The constant self-questioning. The overthinking. She started noticing the little things, how he'd say a name in his sleep, or zone out mid-conversation, or smile faintly at old pictures he thought she didn't see.

Rose. That was the name.

Unusual. Almost cinematic. Diya had heard it only a few times, mentioned in passing long ago. She never thought much of it. She never felt insecure. Why would she? She and Raunak had built a life together, a home, a routine, years of shared laughter and losses.

But now, Rose had become a presence. A shadow in their home. Not through messages or calls no, she believed Raunak hadn't met her again. At least, not physically. But in his mind, she lingered. And that was worse.

Diya had tried everything: being patient, being cheerful, even pretending she didn't notice. But one night, while folding laundry in silence, a realization hit her like a gut punch: He misses her.

That night, Diya cried in the bathroom for an hour. Then she looked at herself in the mirror, mascara smudged, eyes bloodshot, breath shallow, and asked aloud, "What did I do wrong?"

She never got an answer. But a new question formed. Do I still matter?

She decided she had to know the truth. Even if it hurts. Even if it broke her.

That's how the meeting came to be. Sent a message that took her three days to write. Then deleted it. Wrote

again. Deleted again. When she finally sent it, she wished the message would go unanswered.

But Rose had agreed.

And now, Diya was standing on the threshold, her heels clicking softly against the tiles. Her breath caught in her throat. She clenched her fists, trying to ground herself.

“This is madness. Who does this?” She whispered to herself.

You do. Because you're desperate, a reply came from within.

She was about to step outside, but something tugged at her. A strange stillness in the air, like a pause in the soundtrack of a movie right before the plot twists. She suddenly remembered her phone. She had left it in the room.

While waiting, she picked up her phone and stared at the lock screen. A photo from a long time ago now felt like another life. The two of them are on a beach. Raunak was smiling, arm around her shoulder. She was laughing, her head tilted back in joy. Her eyes... they sparkled.

Where did she go?

She traced her reflection in the screen with her thumb.

Did I lose myself trying to keep this going? Was I not enough? Or was I just... too much?

Her fingers trembled as she unlocked the phone. A missed call from her mother. A few unread messages in the family group chat. She ignored them all. She needed to get through tonight.

Her glass bangles chimed faintly, as if whispering encouragement. She looked around the room once more, not sure what she was searching for. Strength, maybe.

“You can do this,” she whispered to herself

“You have to do this.” Still not convinced.

She was tired of surviving in shadows.

She wanted clarity. Closure. She wanted to know if there was still space for her in Raunak’s heart. Or if she had simply become a placeholder in a story that had already moved on.

It was time.

The room was dim, glowing with soft golden light that danced off glass surfaces. It looked like an upscale restaurant —intimate, moody, and elegant. Potted plants draped gracefully from above, and the flicker of warm pendant lights cast long shadows across the walls, and a red rose was placed carefully in the centre. A single table sat at the center, draped in a white linen cloth, two chairs facing each other like old friends —or rivals. The cutlery gleamed, untouched. There was no waiter, no menu, no sound of clinking glasses or murmured conversations. Just silence. Pressed in. Focused. Heavy.

It felt like a place meant for answers. The air was strangely still, yet her heartbeat echoed like a drumroll in her ears. And then, she saw her.

Rose, the name Raunak had whispered in sleep, the ghost from the past Diya had come to resent, envy, and fear. But now, looking across the flickering candlelight of what seemed like an upscale restaurant, Diya’s heart skipped a beat.

Rose wasn't a stranger. She looked too familiar. She looked like...

Hair loose and flowing, face bare but glowing with that wild confidence Diya had long forgotten. She was dressed simply, carelessly even, like she'd just rolled out of bed with a plan to take over the world. There was no hint of compromise in her eyes.

The silence between them was thick like the air before a thunderstorm. Cutlery rested untouched on the table, the water in the glasses unmoved. Somewhere in the distance, music played softly, but in this moment, it was drowned by the pounding of Diya's heart.

She cleared her throat. Her voice felt like it had to push through a thousand unsaid words just to make it out. "Do you... do you know he misses you?"

Rose didn't blink. Her lips curved into the faintest smile, one Diya recognized from old photographs and old memories. The smile of someone who always knew she was unforgettable.

"Yes," Rose said simply.

Diya looked down at her hands, fidgeting with her solitaire ring, her bangles chiming like nervous whispers. "How do you know?" she asked softly.

Rose tilted her head, as if the question didn't need an answer. She didn't answer, just watched her, like a reflection in her eyes, more than just a face.

"Have you been meeting him?" Diya asked quickly, too quickly, the desperation spilling through. Rose finally blinked, the illusion cracking just slightly. "No. We haven't met. Not in years."

Diya let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. A quiet wave of relief washed over her, but it was quickly followed by something else. Shame. Guilt. Confusion.

She looked away, stared at the flickering candlelight for a moment. Then, barely above a whisper, she asked the question that had been building inside her for weeks: "Can you help me?"

Rose leaned forward, her expression softening. Her voice was quieter now, gentler. "Have you talked to Raunak about any of this?"

Diya lowered her eyes, her lips tightening. Silence answered for her. Rose sighed. "You love him. You've built a life with him. But Diya, when did you stop building a life with *yourself*?"

The words stung. Diya opened her mouth, then closed it. A lump rose in her throat. "You think I became less because I grew up?" she said bitterly. "Because I let go of parties and random road trips and reckless dreams?"

Rose's gaze didn't waver. "No. I think you became more. More responsible. More giving. More patient. But in the process, you gave everything *outward* and left nothing *inward*. And he... he started to miss the you who laughed without calculating consequences."

Diya looked away. Her hands had started shaking now.

"So, what should I do?" she asked. "Be twenty again? Start wearing ripped jeans and drinking beer from the bottle?" Rose smiled sadly.

"No. Just stop hiding yourself under what you *think* a perfect person should be. You can be all the things you've

become... and still remember the girl you used to be. She's not gone, Diya."

Tears brimmed in Diya's eyes. Her voice cracked. "He calls you Rose. Sometimes in his sleep."

Rose nodded. "That name... it wasn't mine. He just gave it to me"

In the distance, a knock echoed. Just then, the door creaked open.

Raunak stepped in, and the air in the room shifted. His gaze moved between Diya and... Confusion flickered in his eyes, but beneath it, there was something else, too. Something unspoken. Guilt? Fear? Regret?

Diya's face collapsed the moment she saw him. Her mask of strength faltered. Her eyes, heavily lined and carefully painted, couldn't contain the storm. Tears brimmed, spilled, and traced the edge of her cheek without permission. Her voice came out brittle, like glass cracking beneath weight. "Do you... do you miss Rose?"

Raunak didn't flinch. He didn't even hesitate. He looked directly at her and said the word she feared most. "Yes."

It shattered her.

She stumbled back a little, as though the floor beneath her had cracked open. Her shoulders shook as she tried to hold herself upright. The silence between them was deafening, only punctuated by the frantic rhythm of her heart.

"I changed so much for you," she whispered, her voice trembling. "So much that sometimes I don't even know who I am anymore. And *you*... You still love someone else?"

The last word was spat out, bitter. Fury rushed in like a tide swallowing sadness whole. She stood, abruptly, ready to walk out to run, to vanish. Her bangles clinked violently as her arm brushed past her side. But Raunak moved. Swiftly. He caught her hand tightly, but gently enough not to trap her. "I miss her... but I love you."

His voice was quiet. Honest. And it disarmed her. She stopped. Didn't sit. But didn't leave.

He looked at her not with pity, not with detachment, but with a tenderness she hadn't seen in years. "Don't you miss the old me?" he asked softly.

The question stunned her. She didn't respond right away, but something cracked open inside her again, this time not with pain, but recognition.

"We both changed," Raunak continued. "You know that. Everyone does. I felt the distance too. The silence. But I... I didn't know how to talk about it. And that was my mistake. I thought if I didn't mention it, it wouldn't grow."

He slowly picked up a glass of water, placed it carefully over a coaster, and handed it to her with both hands. When she didn't take it immediately, he set it back on the table and gently turned her chair to face him. He murmured, "*Uncomfortable conversations are hard, but avoiding every conflict makes life harder.* I didn't know this earlier."

Then, he knelt. Held her hands like he was anchoring them both.

"I miss our old life. The chaos. The impulse. The late-night bike rides for ice cream, the way we'd make decisions without thinking twice. But I wouldn't trade today for yesterday. Not even a moment of it."

Diya's eyes welled up again. Her lips trembled. "But you talk about her... a lot."

Her voice was small, but cutting. She turned slightly, glancing at the mirror again. Rose was still there. Still watching. Still waiting.

Raunak followed her gaze. He understood now. "You think Rose is someone I still love." It was a statement, not a question he needed an answer to.

But then Raunak stood up quietly, as if guided by instinct rather than intention. He didn't speak. Instead, he moved around the room with quiet determination, walking over to the switchboard. With a soft click, the room flooded with warm, golden light. The dim glow faded. Shadows retreated.

Then, without a word, he gently took the arm of her chair and turned it slightly, just a few inches to the left, until Diya found herself directly facing the mirror.

She blinked. And froze. There was no Rose in the reflection. Only her. Only Diya.

This wasn't a restaurant. It was her bedroom. That "table" was her dresser. The glow came from her bedside lamp. The soft shimmer of the "restaurant" was nothing more than the ambient lighting around the mirror. The other woman wasn't across the table; it was her reflection. But Diya didn't flinch. The illusion was too precise. Too intentional.

He rested a hand gently on her shoulder, grounding her, not pulling her back, but reminding her of what was real. What was still here.

In that still moment, as the soft hum of light filled the silence, Diya saw not just her present self in the mirror but layers of who she had been. The girl with stars in her eyes and wind in her hair. The woman who once laughed too loudly, danced without rhythm, loved without fear. That girl had a name. Rose. A nickname. A phase. A version of herself Raunak had cherished.

And suddenly, it all made sense. Rose was never someone else. Rose had always been her.

Her breath hitched, and her eyes welled again but this time, the tears felt lighter. Not sharp and painful, but soft. Healing.

She turned slightly, her voice barely above a whisper. "So, it was me... all along?"

Raunak sat beside her again, his presence calm and steady, like he'd been waiting for her to come home to herself.

"I married one version of you," he said gently, "but I never expected her to stay frozen in time. We've both changed, and that's not something to mourn; it's something to honor. I didn't want you to stay the same. I wanted to grow *with* you."

Diya looked at him, eyes wide and tender. "But you missed her... so often."

He smiled, a bittersweet smile. The kind that comes with memory.

"I missed the laughter, the lightness. The way we used to just *be*, without planning or pressure. But I never stopped loving *you*. In fact, I love you now more than I ever could back then because now I see all that you've become.

The grace. The grit. The strength to carry us both when things got heavy.”

She nodded silently. “Diya...” he stood, walked to the mirror, and gently turned her chair so she could see what he saw. “Rose isn’t someone else. Rose was you.”

Diya blinked.

“That’s what I used to call you. Back then. Rose. Because you were like one. Light. Free. Unapologetic. You brought chaos, beauty into my neatly arranged world and made it better.”

She stared at the mirror. The reflection shifted. Rose, her younger self smiled faintly. But she wasn’t smug. Diya looked and whispered, “Sometimes we change so much that we don’t recognise another version of ourselves”.

Raunak turned back to her. “I loved her. Of course I did. But not because she was someone else. I loved her because she was *you*. And I love you now even more for everything you’ve become. I don’t miss her because I want her back. I miss her because I miss *us* before the world got so serious.”

“You made me better,” he added. “More grounded. More human. You made me grow. Don’t you think I changed, too?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes... but I don’t relate, I don’t remember.” Diya swallowed hard. Her lips trembled. That one sentence cracked something wide open inside her, a dam she had been holding for years.

Her voice was barely a whisper. “I forgot what spring felt like.”

Raunak smiled sadly. "We're not meant to go back. We're meant to carry forward the best parts of who we were. We just forgot how to water the roots. But the roots are still there."

Diya's shoulders fell. Her breath caught. Her hands, still in his, began to tighten their grip.

"What about tomorrow?" she asked, her voice barely a breath. "Can we survive it? Or are we just pretending? I'm scared... that we'll fall apart like a dry leaf, floating away from the tree that once held it."

He reached for her hand and held it gently in both of his. "Maybe we *have* become like autumn leaves," he said softly, "a little dry, a little tired. But you know what I've learned about trees?"

She looked up, meeting his eyes. "They don't panic when they shed. They know spring will come." He smiled.

"We forgot to water what we had, Diya. We got busy with the world. But the roots... the roots are still strong. And I believe in us enough to plant new seeds. Let's not fall. Let's bloom again."

She turned again to the mirror. Rose smiled. Diya stared at her for a long moment, then whispered, "You're still in me, aren't you?" The reflection faded into her own face.

Older. Stronger. Enough.

Raunak's phone buzzed. He looked at the screen. Then back at her. "Family function," he said with a small chuckle. "Another duty. Another expectation."

They got ready to attend a function at Diya's parents' home. He reached out his hand not out of obligation, but

with intention. "Let's go fulfill it. Together." Then, after a breath: "But from now on, not just as parents, or guests, or responsible adults... but as two people still choosing each other."

Diya hesitated, then placed her hand in his. His grip was warm. Familiar. Steady. "We won't fall like autumn leaves," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "We'll flourish like spring flowers."

That made her smile. They turned to leave, footsteps soft on the wooden floor. But just as they reached the door, something made Diya pause. She turned.

The mirror stood there quietly. Reflective. Honest. And within it...

Rose. Younger. Carefree. Whole. Standing there with her arms loosely by her side and a knowing smile on her face.

Their eyes met. Rose didn't speak but her lips moved. "You are enough."

Tears welled in Diya's eyes but they didn't fall. They sparkled instead, like raindrops just before the bloom. She raised her hand, slowly. And waved. And Rose waved back.

Not with sadness. Not with longing. But with peace.

Then, like the mist of memory, Rose began to fade, not vanish, but dissolve gently into the reflection of the woman Diya had become.

Stronger. Softer. Whole.

Diya took one last breath, full of lightness she hadn't felt in years. She whispered, almost to the mirror: "Thank you for waiting."

Then she turned back towards the drawer and picked up the rose gold pin she had ignored for years. Holding it close, she said, "I am worthy, always".

And as the door closed behind her, she felt something shift inside like the very first bud of spring pushing through winter soil.

It was time. Time to stop mourning the past. Time to rewrite the story. Time to become the main character again. And this time, she wasn't playing a main character role. She was living it.

At night she scribbled in her diary, *a quote by Virginia Woolf – From her diaries*

"I am rooted, but I flow."

The Sunset Chaser

As the sun began its slow descent behind the distant line of coconut palms, the sky over the village transformed into a canvas of molten gold, fiery orange, and soft rose. The gentle hum of crickets and the rustling of banana leaves filled the air, mingling with the faint, rhythmic clang of a cow's bell in the distance.

From the backyard of a mud-walled house with a tiled roof, a small pond shimmered in the fading light, its surface gently rippling with the evening breeze. Lotus leaves floated lazily on the water, their edges catching glints of sunlight like tiny mirrors. Numerous bloomed pink lotus and a few pairs of white ducks stood still at the edge; their reflections painted delicately on the pond like a forgotten dream.

Children's laughter echoed faintly from across the fields, where women in sarees, now bathed in the amber glow, carried brass pots of water on their heads, their silhouettes graceful and timeless. A lone mango tree at the corner of the yard stood proud, its branches dark against the horizon, while the scent of wet earth and distant woodsmoke rose with the cooling air. There was a paved terrace around the tree, which served as a local cafe-like point of the village.

As the last sliver of sun dipped below the horizon, the sky turned a dusky violet, and the pond mirrored it all in a

quiet, glimmering tribute to the day's end in this peaceful Indian village.

The alarm buzzed sharply, shattering the stillness of early morning. Aisha stirred, her hand instinctively reaching out to silence it. For a moment, she lay still, eyes closed, trying to slip back into the dream that had wrapped her heart in a strange, lingering warmth. It was always the same dream, gentle, vivid, and haunting in its beauty. Over the past few years, it had visited her more often, like an old memory knocking on the door of her consciousness. Every time it came, she awoke feeling peaceful and satisfied, yet curiously incomplete.

In the dream, she would find herself walking barefoot on soft earth, the scent of mud and wildflowers hanging in the air. The skies above would stretch in watercolor hues, orange melting into purple as the sun dipped behind palm-lined fields. Somewhere in the background, there would be the lull of water in a pond, familiar and still reflecting the golden sky. And as she stood there, a sense of belonging would flood her, as if she were home. Completely and truly home.

But reality always returned with the shrill ring of the alarm, pulling her back into a world far removed from the one in her dreams.

Life, by most measures, was good. She had a stable job at a well-known company, a small but close-knit circle of friends, and her independence. She wasn't in love, but she didn't feel the need to chase it either. Love, she believed, would come when the time was right. The universe would send the right person at the right time. Until then, she was content. Or at least, she thought she was.

Recently, she had moved into to a new rental apartment, one that made sense on paper. It was closer to her office, saving her precious hours in the commute. The rent was lower, which meant more savings, and the locality was decent. Everything seemed perfect. Except, it wasn't.

The moment she moved in, she felt the subtle dissonance between the house and her soul. It wasn't that the space was unpleasant. It was functional, modern, and conveniently located. But it lacked something essential. It had no balconies that opened westward, no windows that welcomed the setting sun. The evenings, once her favorite time of day, had become flat and unremarkable. The warm hues of twilight that once painted her walls and stirred her heart were now blocked by concrete and closed corridors.

In her previous home, no matter how tiring the day had been, she always found solace in sitting by the window with a cup of coffee, watching the sky turn from gold to pink to indigo. Those sunsets, fleeting yet full of emotion, felt like a silent conversation between her and the universe; it was her liberation call to freedom. But here, in this new place, that quiet ritual had been stolen from her.

It was only on weekends now, when she visited nearby parks or took short evening walks, that she got a glimpse of what she missed. But those moments were too brief, too fragmented to fill the space that sunsets once occupied in her life. Her soul yearned for that gentle pause, that golden hour when the world slowed down and everything felt aligned.

She had tried to adjust. She told herself that priorities change, that growing up means making sacrifices. But the truth remained: deep down, she was still a little village girl, the one who found joy in simple things: the earthy scent

after rain, the chirping of birds at dusk, the soft rustle of trees, and the quiet reflection of a pond under a sunset sky.

Her heart had never outgrown that landscape, even if her life had moved miles away from it. The village girl inside her still stood barefoot at the edge of that dream pond, watching the sky dissolve into colors, holding on to a feeling that reality no longer gave her.

And so, every morning, when the dream returned, she welcomed it like an old friend. She tried to hold onto it for a few more seconds, just to carry its peace into her waking life. It reminded her of what she truly missed, not a person, not a place, but a way of being. A part of herself that still believed in sunsets, in waiting without rushing, in beauty that cost nothing but gave everything.

Aisha was just five when her world began to shift. Her father had secured a promising job in a nearby city, and the family packed their belongings, leaving behind the familiar lanes and comforting simplicity of her grandparents' village home. Though young, Aisha felt the change deeply. The city was loud, busy, and full of unfamiliar faces. But every Sunday, without fail, they would return to the village and herself; those visits were more than a weekly ritual. They were a return to herself.

The village, nestled among swaying fields and scattered ponds, felt like a timeless place, untouched by the rush of the outside world. Aisha would eagerly await Sunday mornings, waking up early with childlike anticipation. As the car rolled past the winding roads lined with neem and banyan trees, a quiet joy would fill her chest.

Her favorite part of those visits was wandering through the bustling local market. With its earthy scent of fresh vegetables, the sweet aroma of jaggery, and the colorful

chaos of villagers bargaining in warm, familiar dialects, it was a sensory celebration. She didn't always ask for toys or sweets. Just walking through the crowd, observing faces and colors, filled her heart with joy.

But what she loved more than anything else were the animals. Her grandparents had a modest little courtyard, where two cows lounged lazily and a group of ducks waddled freely, quacking their way from one puddle to another. Playing among them was Aisha's second-favorite joy. She would talk to the cows as if they understood her stories from the city, and laugh as the ducks flapped and splashed around her feet. There was no need for toys when there was life all around her, simple and true. Her elder sister, Sona, was always lost in her books.

She never made friends in the village, not because she couldn't, but perhaps because she never wanted to. She didn't need playmates when she had the sun, the sky, the animals, and the soft whisper of the wind through the trees. Nature was her companion, her comfort, her teacher. It listened without judgment, spoke without words, and healed without effort.

Still, nothing could compare to the quiet magic of sunset in the village. That was her sacred hour. As evening approached, she would sit cross-legged in the open courtyard, her chin resting in her palms, eyes fixed on the horizon. The sky would melt into hues of orange, pink, and purple, casting a golden glow over the dusty paths and distant fields. The breeze carried the scent of earth and smoke from nearby kitchens. Everything slowed down, as if the world itself paused to watch the sun take its graceful bow. In those moments, Aisha felt a deep, inexplicable peace.

Years later, even as life moved forward and the visits became less frequent, those Sundays remained etched in her memory. Aisha often looked back, not with sadness, but with gratitude for the village that raised her soul, and the sunsets that taught her how to be still.

Before she tried to find her liberation in dance, losing herself in the rhythm. There was freedom in those moments, a fleeting sense of being weightless, unburdened. But it didn't last. So, she wandered. She found solace in journeys, long train rides through unfamiliar towns, walking through narrow lanes of old cities, and watching strangers live their lives from behind a window seat. When the outside world grew too loud, she turned inward. She found comfort in cooking, the slow, methodical chopping of vegetables, the hiss of spices hitting hot oil, the transformation of raw into nourishment. It grounded her, connected her to memory, to home, to all the women who came before her.

And then, in quiet moments of stillness, she discovered meditation. It wasn't dramatic or sudden. It began with just sitting, breathing, listening. At first, it was hard. But over time, that stillness became a mirror. In silence, she began to meet herself without performance, without escape.

It was while witnessing sunset one day, in the quiet space between breath and being, that her search finally began to turn inward. Not for answers, but for understanding. Not for freedom from the world, but for peace within it. Her liberation wasn't in the dance, the journey, or even the silence; it was in the act of coming home to herself.

In the bustling rhythm of office life, Aisha often found herself longing for something more than just deadlines and digital screens. While others around her found comfort in promotions and perks, she yearned for something quieter, something the heart could feel but not quite articulate. So, when one of her colleagues resigned, leaving behind a vacant desk by the window, Aisha saw an opportunity not for more visibility or a better network connection, but for a view. A Westward view, to be precise.

It was a seat no one wanted. During the sweltering months of summer, the afternoon sun poured through the glass, rendering the air conditioning nearly useless. By midday, the desk would turn into a miniature furnace. Most avoided it without second thought. But Aisha had her eyes on that corner for weeks. Quietly strategising, timing her request, subtly enquiring with HR, she waited for the right moment.

Her intention was simple sunsets. Even if it was just for a few minutes before she logged off, she craved that fleeting beauty she missed so dearly since moving into her new apartment. That gentle dip of the sun, the golden-orange sky, the peace it brought. A sliver of stillness in her otherwise fast-paced life. She imagined sipping her evening coffee at her desk, letting the sun melt her stress away. It felt worth the effort.

When her transfer request was approved, she felt an odd sense of victory. She packed her belongings with anticipation and moved to her new spot the next morning. But as the days passed and the much-awaited sunset hour arrived, her hope slowly began to dull.

The view she had imagined was far from reality. Instead of a picturesque skyline, all she could see was a blur

of concrete buildings and tangled power lines. The western sky, once romanticized in her memories, was veiled in layers of dust and construction debris during the summer. The golden light she had so deeply longed for turned out to be more of a hazy glow, dulled and dirty, more industrial than inspiring.

In winter, the view grew worse. Smog settled in like a stubborn guest, blurring even the outlines of distant buildings. The sun would disappear long before it set, swallowed by greyish air thick with pollution. It didn't feel like a view anymore; it felt like staring into an illusion.

The only time the scene regained a touch of its beauty was during the monsoon. Clouds would roll in dramatically, and occasional bursts of color would surprise her. But even then, the joy was incomplete. Aisha had never loved the rain. The dampness, the puddles, the unpredictability: it didn't soothe her. She wasn't a water baby, never had been. The season felt like melancholy wrapped in beauty she couldn't embrace.

In the end, the sunset she had fought for was just another reminder that sometimes what we chase in memory doesn't quite survive the present. Still, she stayed at that desk, not for the view it offered, but for what it once promised.

Back at home, Aisha created a little sanctuary of her own, a quiet rebellion against the concrete viewlessness that surrounded her city life. With no balcony or west-facing window to catch the evening light, she decided to bring the sunset to her instead. It was an odd setup, one that might have seemed strange to anyone else, but for Aisha, it made perfect sense.

She began with the west-facing wall in her living room, plain and empty, just waiting to become something more. After weeks of pondering, she bought herself a modest but sleek television and mounted it at the center of the wall. Just above the TV, she hung a soft linen curtain, not for functionality, but for effect. She wanted the act of pulling the curtain open to feel like revealing a window, a small ritual to mark the end of the day. Beside it, she placed a small table fan, angled just right.

Every evening, the same rhythm followed. After returning from work, she would take her time freshening up, changing into her most comfortable silk pyjamas, the kind that felt like a second skin and whispered softness with every step. She'd head into the kitchen and make herself a cup of black coffee, strong, aromatic, and without sugar, just the way she liked it. It had become her signature pause, her cue to let the day fall away.

With coffee in hand, she would return to her living room, gently draw back the curtain as if opening a portal to somewhere far more peaceful, and sit cross-legged on her floor cushion. Then she'd switch on the fan, set to the lowest speed so it moved the air with a gentle whisper. The breeze brushed against her face and stirred her hair in slow motion, mimicking the touch of an early evening wind.

Then came the final step. She turned on the TV and played a carefully chosen YouTube video, a long, slow village sunset captured from a still camera. No background music. Just the distant sounds of birds returning home, a soft rustle of leaves, and the golden light melting over ponds, palm trees, and quiet courtyards. It wasn't real, not in the literal sense, but it felt real enough. Real in the way memories feel faint, warm, and comforting.

As the artificial sun dipped lower on the screen, her body relaxed, her breath slowed, and her mind softened. In that corner of her apartment, where there were no windows or open skies, Aisha had managed to create her own little sunset haven. It wasn't about the technology or the visuals. It was the feeling. The ritual. The intention.

In this space she had built with love and longing, she found what she'd been missing, not the sunset itself, but the tranquility it once gave her. The sense of pausing, of being fully present, of letting the world blur into something quieter. And for a few minutes each day, in that curated illusion, Aisha came home to herself.

One quiet evening, after finishing a simple home-cooked meal, Aisha decided to take a walk in the neighborhood park. The city, as always, buzzed faintly in the background: cars in the distance, a dog barking somewhere, the occasional burst of laughter from passing strangers. But above, the sky was still.

It was a new moon night. The kind where the sky looked endless, a vast stretch of black velvet pierced with stars. Aisha tilted her head back and let herself breathe. The kind of deep, unhurried breath she regularly and intentionally practiced.

And then suddenly, like magic, a streak of light dashed across the sky.

A shooting star.

Caught off guard, her heart fluttered. Without thinking, she closed her eyes and made a wish. Not the usual kind filled with material desires or vague hopes. But something simple. Pure. Her mind whispered:

"Take me back to peace. Take me home."

The word “home” echoed through her chest. Not the rented apartment filled with soft lamps and incense. Not the desk at her job or the cafes she frequented. She meant *that* home, the village, the pond, the courtyard, the trees that knew her as a child. The rhythm of stillness that had once been her sanctuary.

She opened her eyes and stood there in the silence. The city lights continued to blink around her, unaware. She didn’t know when or how, but in that instant, she knew *she would return*. To herself. To the life that felt real. To the place where the sunsets weren’t dreams on a screen, but the sky’s gift every evening.

Days passed, and nothing changed, neither her place nor her dream.

One fine Sunday morning, Aisha found herself at the familiar footsteps of the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. The sun had just begun to stretch its golden arms across the city skyline, and the streets were still relatively quiet, a rare calm for the capital. As per her long-standing ritual, she had planned the morning with the kind of deliberate joy only a true enthusiast could understand.

Before heading to the museum, she made a small detour, one that her heart never let her skip breakfast. Not just any breakfast, but her absolute favorite: *Idiyappam*, soft as clouds and delicate as lace, served warm with a generous helping of kurma and coconut milk. It was a dish hard to come by in the northern part of India, but she knew just where to find it, Sagar Ratna, nestled in the heart of Connaught Place. The South Indian chain had somehow managed to perfect the dish, or perhaps it was simply that it reminded her of vacations, of temples, of a slower, kinder rhythm of life.

She reached early, just as the restaurant was opening. The servers recognized her with a polite nod, and she slipped into her usual corner table. The *Idiyappam* arrived in a wide steel plate, delicately coiled like white silk threads. She dipped the first bite in coconut milk, let the softness melt on her tongue, followed it with a spoonful of spicy kurma, and closed her eyes in contentment. For Aisha, food had always been her first love. Whether she was cooking or simply savoring a meal, it was more than sustenance, it was connection, memory, and celebration.

Though she had taken to cooking only in her later years, her passion for food was rooted deep in her childhood. She had been the kid who asked for second helpings not just for the taste but to understand how flavors blended. She would sneak into the kitchen during festivals to steal sweets and snacks and to watch her mother and grandmother cook, absorbing the language of spices with wide-eyed curiosity.

After a satisfying breakfast and a strong, perfectly brewed filter coffee that wrapped her senses in a warm hug, she was ready to begin the real adventure of the day. The museum was a short auto ride away, and as she leaned back watching the streets glide past her, a soft breeze played with the edge of her dupatta. There was something about museum visits that always made her feel both nostalgic and new.

At the entrance of the National Gallery of Modern Art, she smiled to herself as she paid the entry fee of Rs. 20. It never failed to amaze her how such a priceless experience came wrapped in such humble packaging. The entry ticket, small and unassuming, was a souvenir she cherished and collected from different museums and historic places, even foreign lands. Over the years, she had

collected dozens of them, storing them in a wooden box on her bookshelf. Some were pressed into old diaries, while others had been carefully transformed into bookmarks. Each ticket held the memory of a mood, a thought, a moment of quiet inspiration.

She stepped into the cool, quiet halls of the gallery, letting the silence wrap around her like a soft shawl. The wide white walls, the muted lighting, the gentle echoes of footsteps, it all felt sacred in its own way. As she wandered through the exhibits, pausing at oil paintings, abstract forms, and installations that challenged her mind, Aisha felt herself expanding. Art didn't always provide answers, but it offered perspective. It reminded her that beauty could be found in fragments, in shadows, in chaos.

And perhaps that was what kept her coming back not just to the museum, but to these small, curated Sundays that strung together the scattered pieces of her soul. In food, in art, in stillness, and in motion, Aisha continued to seek herself not in grand declarations but in the quiet rituals of joy she had crafted with her own hands.

The National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi was hushed that Sunday morning, its quiet halls echoing with the gentle footsteps of art lovers. Aisha wandered through its familiar corridors, drawn this time by something extraordinary: an exhibition titled "*Nicholas Roerich: An Eternal Quest*." The showcase, celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of the Russian painter, featured over 80 pieces from his Indian period and his famed Himalayan series.

She hadn't expected to feel such a powerful pull.

The moment she stepped into the gallery housing Roerich's works, she was transfixed. Before her stretched canvas after canvas of the Himalayan ranges, not just in

form, but in spirit. These were not ordinary landscapes. They pulsed with something eternal, something beyond paint. Roerich didn't just depict mountains; he revealed them. The shades he used were not merely color; they were emotion, depth, transcendence. The blues were not just blue. The whites were not only snow. Every painting shimmered with an otherworldly light, like whispers from another realm.

He was rightfully called the *Master of the Mountains*. No one else, she thought, had captured their essence with such reverence and intuition. The solemnity of the peaks, their quiet grandeur, the way they stood untouched and ancient; Roerich had not just seen the Himalayas, he had felt them. His work resonated with Indian philosophy, the silence of sages, and the quest for higher truth. Aisha stood in front of one particularly haunting painting, the sun dipping behind snowy ridges, casting a warm, rose-gold light across the sky, and she felt something awaken within her.

It was a moment of epiphany.

Her childhood dreams, the sunsets she tried to recreate in her living room, the longings she poured into coffee cups, and quiet weekends—all of it pointed to this: she wanted to paint. Not just any painting, but *her* vision. The one she had carried quietly all along.

She could see it now. A canvas filled with the golden hues of dusk, a silhouette of a quiet village pond, a little girl watching the sun sink low. *The Sunset Chaser*.

She didn't need to be Roerich. But like him, she longed to express what the soul saw, what words failed to describe. That day, amidst the sacred quiet of the gallery, Aisha made a promise to herself. She would create her own window to beauty and let the light in.

Aisha was not an ace painter, far from it. She was a novice, someone who had dabbled with colors years ago, only to tuck away the brushes in the corners of life. It was her attempt to find her flow. But after her visit to the Roerich exhibition, something inside her shifted. She could no longer ignore the quiet longing to create, to express her vision of the world through art. Yet she knew she needed to ease herself back in.

Before beginning the piece that had taken shape so vividly in her mind, the village sunset, her "Sunset Chaser," she decided to start small. She began practicing with simple crafts and miniature paintings, slowly oiling the rusted gears of her creativity. It was not about perfection, just flow. She let her hands move freely, experimenting with textures, strokes, and unfamiliar techniques. Evenings became her practice ground. Between work and dinner, she'd pull out a sketchpad or a few scraps of canvas and try her hand at textures, blending colors, tracing silhouettes.

Though she was never fond of social media, she created a private Instagram account purely as a journal of her artistic journey. It wasn't for followers, likes, or applause. The account was her quiet accountability partner, a digital sketchbook where she could track her growth and stay inspired by other artists' works. She saved reels on layering techniques, color mixing, brush handling, and mood creation. Every saved video, every upload, and each story pulled her closer to confidence. It was never about building a following; it was about growing one brushstroke at a time.

After about a month of this gentle practice, Aisha felt something click. Her strokes were still imperfect, but her vision had grown clearer. And with her birthday a month away, the timing felt right. This year, she decided, her gift

would come not in wrapping paper, but from within. She would paint her dream of the sunset from her memories, her longing, her imagination.

Not for the world. Not even for art's sake. Just for herself.

An act of self-love, finally made visible on canvas.

Day 1: The large, blank canvas intimidated her. So white, so silent, so expectant. But Aisha touched it gently, like greeting an old friend. She whispered her intention: "*This is for me.*" A tiny flicker of courage lit up inside her. She painted her first stroke in silence.

Day 2: She traced the scene from her dreams: distant hills, a glimmering pond, a little girl seated with her back turned. It felt raw, like touching a memory too soon. She paused, not sure if she was painting or remembering.

Day 3: Then the sky came. Pale gold, soft and weightless. As she brushed the colors across the canvas, she felt her chest loosen. Something inside her, tightly wrapped for years, began to exhale.

Day 4: Orange hues melted into the horizon. She always worked in silence. It felt like prayer. The kind you say not with words but with your hands, over and over again, hoping to be heard.

Day 5: The sun half-sunk, burning gently. She was nervous about painting it. What if she didn't get it right? But as the brush touched the canvas, she let go of perfection. *Beauty was in the imperfection.*

Day 6: Banana trees, tiled roofs, familiar silhouettes she hadn't seen in years. She painted slowly, eyes moist.

Her childhood was returning to her in fragments of light and shadow.

Day 7: She added the pond. Still, deep, reflecting the fading sky. Like her mind, quiet but heavy. She stared at it long after the painting session ended.

Day 8: Ripples appeared, gentle and barely visible. She realized how often her life had been like that, quiet on the surface, shifting underneath.

Day 9: The girl finally took form. A braid, a loose kurta, legs folded beneath her. Aisha stared at her longer than she expected. It was her, but also every version of her she had abandoned along the way.

Day 10: The grass grew around the pond. Green, wild, untamed. She hadn't planned the messiness, but it felt right. Growth was never neat, indeed mostly messy in the beginning.

Day 11: A cow by the water. Gentle, peaceful. Like the ones she once watched while waiting for her grandmother to call her in for dinner. The smell of dung, hay, and turmeric flashed through her.

Day 12: She added birds flying home. And with them, a surge of longing. For a home within herself, she hadn't yet fully built.

Day 13: She painted windchimes from memory—bells hanging from a tree. As a child, she believed they whispered secrets only she could hear.

Day 14: Shadows crept in. The light was shifting, and so was she. The painting had stopped being a project. It had become a mirror.

Day 15: No painting today. Aisha needed to restock the art supplies and also practice some crafts.

Day 16: Back to the canvas. She painted in silence. Each stroke was a stitch, mending something frayed inside.

Day 17: A mud hut appeared, earthy and warm. She remembered falling asleep to the sound of insects and distant drums. She missed that kind of noise, which felt like silence.

Day 18: A kettle. Two steel cups. Maybe the girl was waiting for someone. Or maybe she just made coffee for herself. Like Aisha had learned to do alone, but never lonely.

Day 19: A bamboo fence now lined the scene. Small vines climbing up. Slow, persistent, like her own growth.

Day 20: The trees darkened slightly. They stood like quiet guards. It took her all day to complete two trees.

Day 21: She painted a sleeping dog. It hadn't been part of the plan. But it made the painting breathe.

Day 22: Soft lamps appeared by the hut. It was evening now, in the painting and in her own life. She felt the bittersweetness of time passing.

Day 23: She brushed movement into the scene, a fluttering dupatta, swaying leaves, rippling water. She'd once chased stillness. Now she embraced the dance.

Day 24: Final sky tones muted rose, burnt amber, smoky indigo. She watched the light change with reverence. It reminded her that nothing stays, and that's beautiful.

Day 25: No brush touched the canvas. She just stared at it, then at herself in the mirror. The girl in the painting was whole. So was she.

Day 26: The sky deepened. The light surrendered to night. She smiled. Not everything had to stay golden.

Day 27: She added tiny stars. Barely-there specks. But they were prominent signs of the darkness of the night.

Day 28: Her signature: a simple A, in the corner. It didn't shout. It whispered: "*I showed up.*"

Day 29: She framed it with a wooden frame. No glass. She wanted to touch it whenever she needed to remember.

Day 30 (Her Birthday): Aisha lit a diya in front of the painting. Dressed in her favorite cotton kurta, she made black coffee, no sugar, and sat cross-legged before it. The fan blew gently. The painting glowed.

She had painted her dream. But more importantly, she had painted herself back together.

She didn't just chase the sunset anymore. *She became it.*

But that's the funny thing about life, just when you think you've finally arrived, it turns the corner on you.

Aisha had gone to bed that night feeling complete. The painting she created was her dream on canvas, her soul laid bare in strokes of orange and gold, sat glowing softly on her west wall. It was more than a painting; it was a culmination of healing, stillness, and finding home within herself. She had no intention of sharing it widely or doing anything more. She was content.

Then morning came.

The alarm went off, but she didn't rise. Her body, by now, had grown used to the act of delaying wakefulness just to return to *that* dream again. The one with the village

pond, the girl, the dusky sky. Except today, something felt different. It wasn't a dream anymore. It felt real. The air, the smells, even the soil beneath her bare feet, it was as though she'd slipped into another reality. Her heart raced. She was *there*, and the moment felt more vivid than ever before.

When she finally woke up, she was late. But she didn't feel the rush. A strange calmness stayed with her as she got ready for work, almost as though something important was waiting for her.

And then, it happened.

As she sipped her half-finished black coffee, her phone buzzed. A notification from Instagram, an unfamiliar username had sent her a direct message.

"Are you interested in selling this painting?"

Aisha paused, confused. She opened the art account she had created months ago just to track her progress. She had uploaded the final piece a few days earlier with barely any caption. There were no hashtags. She didn't care for likes or reach. Yet, here it was, someone asking to buy it.

She typed a polite reply: *"No, not for sale. Thank you."*

She didn't think much of it and left for the office.

But an hour later, another message came. *"Name your price."*

She stared at the screen. Was this a prank? This time, she didn't respond.

By afternoon, the whole thing had faded from her mind. She was back to attending meetings, clearing emails, and helping a junior with a presentation. Then, right when

she was about to shut her laptop for a break, her phone buzzed again.

"1 crore."

Her heart skipped a beat. She read it again. One crore. As in, ten million rupees. For *her* painting. She laughed in disbelief. Out loud. A few colleagues looked over.

This couldn't be real. She typed a short, composed reply: *"Not interested."*

But something had begun to stir inside her.

All day, the message echoed in her mind. One crore. For her art. Something she had created in solitude, for herself. A reflection of her healing, her longing, her journey.

The days that followed turned into quiet chaos in her mind.

She went to the office as usual, cooked dinner, called her parents, watched sunset videos like always, but nothing felt the same. A strange question kept chasing her like a shadow: *"Is this it?"*

Was this her life? Was this job truly her calling? The cubicle, the reports, the Friday status updates, were that all?

She had always imagined her art to be something sacred, private. But now, a door had been nudged open. Not by ego, but by curiosity. And for the first time in years, she allowed herself to wonder *what if there were more?*

By the end of that week, her mind was made.

When the prospective buyer messaged again with a simple, "Still not interested?", Aisha smiled to herself. She had an idea. Not just for the sale, but for her life. She

replied calmly: "1.5 crore. Non-negotiable." A few seconds later, she added: "I already have another offer for 1.3 crore."

That part wasn't exactly true, but she wanted to test the waters. See how much belief the world had in her. And how much she had in herself.

The reply came quicker than she expected. "*Deal.*" She stared at the screen, the words imprinting themselves onto her sense of reality.

In that moment, something shifted deep within her. Not just about money or validation, but about freedom. The freedom to choose differently. The freedom to believe she could create a life she hadn't dared to imagine before.

The painting was no longer just a sunset. *It was her dawn.*

Six months had passed since the painting was sold.

The money had come in quietly, without pomp, without noise. But what it changed inside Aisha was louder than anything she had ever heard in her heart before. For the first time in years, she didn't feel like she was chasing a version of herself. She had caught up.

And now, Aisha was in her village.

Not just visiting, not escaping the city for a weekend, she had come *home*. Her childhood home. The same one where, at five, she had watched cows graze by the pond and the sun dip into the water like a sleepy orange. The home she had dreamed of again and again, so vividly that her subconscious had turned it into its own reality.

That house, long sold to a distant relative by her father and uncle, had come back to her. She bought it for ₹50

lakhs. A good price for a village home, most would say. But to Aisha, it was priceless.

People were in disbelief. Whispers floated around like dust in summer air.

"She lived in the city, didn't she? Why would she return here?"
"She left her job?"

"She could've bought a flat in the city!"

But Aisha didn't hear any of it. Or rather, she had grown past the point where such things could shake her. She believed in herself now, and more importantly, in her dreams, not as fantasy, but as a map.

She spent another few lakhs getting the house renovated and refurbished. Not extravagantly, but thoughtfully. She kept the original courtyard and preserved the mango tree out back. The pond remained untouched. She added windows that welcomed more sunlight rather than keeping it out. Clay tiles, soft linens, walls painted in muted earth tones. Every detail held intention. It was not about grandeur; it was about *coming alive*.

Aisha's sister Sona was a finance manager. And she took her help. With the rest of the money, she invested smartly. She created an emergency fund and built a portfolio for the future. This time, she was building a life, not just a portfolio.

And what a life it was.

She became a teacher, not the kind that lectures from textbooks, but the kind that teaches from the heart. Mornings began with yoga sessions by the pond, the mist still curling above the water as her students, children, elders, and some travelers breathed in unison.

During the day, she taught art at the nearby school. She saw herself in the kids who held their brushes uncertainly at first but later dipped them confidently into their dreams. She watched them transform. She painted for herself again, not intending to make another big cheque, simply with no intention at all.

Evenings were for dance. Her old ghungroos came out again, and so did the rhythm inside her. She danced barefoot in the open courtyard, her saree twirling with every beat, the sky slowly melting into gold above her.

Every moment was wrapped in meaning. Her life was now a composition of all the things she had once clung to in glimpses: yoga, painting, dancing, teaching, silence, nature. She no longer lived for weekends or brief respites. Her entire life *was* a respite.

The TV? It gathered gentle dust in a corner. She didn't need to play YouTube sunsets anymore.

Because now, every single day, she *witnessed* her dream. Not in pixels, not behind a screen, but with her bare feet on the mud floor, the scent of cow dung mingling with rain in the air, with birds returning home as she sat by the pond.

She didn't need to imagine freedom anymore. Her life itself felt liberated.

There was no urgency in her days now. No rushing through traffic, no chasing the clock, no need to prove anything to anyone. In her solitude, she found community. In her work, she found worship. And in her stillness, she found meaning.

Aisha, the sunset chaser, had finally stopped chasing. Because she had arrived right where she was always meant to be.

One quiet evening, under the cover of a new moon night, Aisha sat by the pond, wrapped in the stillness that only the village could offer. The sky above stretched endlessly, dark and serene, scattered with distant stars that blinked softly like secrets kept by the universe. The air was cool, the leaves whispered with the breeze, and the world felt unhurried.

As she gazed upward, lost in thought, a shooting star streaked across the sky, brief, brilliant, and beautiful. It reminded her of the night when she had first wished for peace, for a return to the life she longed for.

But this time, Aisha didn't make a wish. She didn't close her eyes. She didn't whisper hopes to the sky. Instead, she sat still, eyes open, heart calm.

A gentle smile touched her lips. She didn't need anything more.

In that fleeting moment, she felt deeply grateful for the journey, the challenges, the quiet courage, and for how far she had come. Her heart, once full of longing, now felt light and complete.

With a soft breath, she whispered, "Thank you."

Thank you to the sky above her. Thank you to the ground beneath her feet. Thank you to the winding path that had led her back to herself.

The shooting star faded, but the peace it left behind remained, glowing quietly within her.

She was home.

Watches Don't Tell Time

Time was a vague concept to Sarika, something that passed, something adults obsessed over, something her teachers scolded her about. But she had never really *felt* it, never carried it in her pocket or on her wrist, never measured it as anything more than school bells and tuition hours. That was about to change.

Sarika wasn't particularly tense. She was surprisingly calm, especially compared to her classmates who were biting their nails and revising formulas every few minutes. It was board exam season, and the whole neighborhood seemed to be under curfew. Whispered voices, late-night lights, tensed faces, prayers murmured under breath.

Her mother, however, was a bundle of nerves. She had checked Sarika's admit card thrice, sharpened every pencil, and packed an extra pen just in case one ran out of ink. She hovered around Sarika like a mother bird fretting over her baby's first flight, smoothing invisible creases on her uniform, straightening her hair unnecessarily.

"Ma, I'm not going to war," Sarika said, half-laughing. "But this is a kind of war, no?" her mother replied. "A war of focus, courage, and time."

Her father sat silently in a corner, newspaper open but unread. He was always like that, quiet in his love, restrained

in his concern. He folded the paper neatly and disappeared into the other room.

That night, just as Sarika was about to sleep, her mother came in holding something wrapped in an old, soft velvet cloth. She sat at the edge of the bed, eyes gentle, lips unsure.

“I want you to have this,” she said.

Sarika unwrapped the bundle slowly. Inside lay an old wristwatch, golden dial, black leather strap, slightly worn out, the surface little scratched by years of use. A relic. It ticked faintly.

“It was mine,” her mother said softly. “Your father gifted me long back, I don’t even remember how old it is.”

Sarika’s eyes widened. “You’ve kept it for so long?”

“I never throw away things that mattered,” her mother said. “They carry energy... memories. This one helped me manage time when we had nothing. I thought it might help you now.”

Sarika ran her fingers over the worn leather. It didn’t feel outdated; it felt alive. The kind of alive that comes from being part of someone’s story.

Her father returned, holding two cups of warm turmeric milk. He sat beside her and nodded toward the watch. “It’s not fancy,” he said. “But it’s honest. Doesn’t lie. And if you learn to respect time, it will respect you.”

Sarika looked at him, puzzled.

“You can earn back lost money. You can rebuild broken relationships. Even health, sometimes, returns with discipline. But time...” He paused. “Time, once gone, never turns back. It’s the only real currency.”

Her mother added, "And don't let time chase you. Walk with it. Let it teach you patience, not panic."

Sarika swallowed hard. Her exams suddenly didn't feel like the most important thing. That old watch in her hand weighed more than pressure; it held purpose.

"I'll wear it," she said. "Every day."

And from that moment, it was no longer just about exams. A seed had been planted in her. Time was no longer a burden to race against; it had become her quiet companion.

The next morning, Sarika wore the old watch like armor. It felt warm against her skin, not from the weather, but from the memories it carried. She walked into the exam center with her friends, the air thick with tension and murmured prayers. Most students were clutching last-minute notes; some were pacing like prisoners awaiting a verdict.

"Nice watch," one of her friends mumbled, eyes still scanning a textbook.

Sarika smiled. "It was my mother's," she said, hoping the weight of the sentence would land. But it didn't. Everyone was too wrapped up in their worries. That was okay. She didn't wear it for them.

With each paper, she didn't just write answers; she kept pace with time, and learned to trust its rhythm. She began each exam calmly, finished with grace, and walked out without the usual post-exam panic. Her greatest triumph wasn't the marks that followed weeks later; it was something quieter, more personal. She had learned to walk beside time, not against it.

Years passed, and Sarika grew into a young woman who moved through life with intention. She color-coded her planners, woke up before sunrise, and took notes with diligence. Her friends joked that she was part monk, part machine. But what they didn't know was that it wasn't about perfection. It was about reverence. Time had become her quiet companion, her guide. In it, she found order. In its discipline, she found a strange sort of freedom.

The day her college list was announced, everything stood still for a moment. She had been selected for a prestigious university in a bustling metro city, miles away from the only world she had known. Her parents were proud, though the smiles were tinged with hesitation. Her mother folded clothes in silence for hours that day. Her father lingered longer than usual near her doorway, watching her pack.

The night before her departure, he called her to the courtyard. The stars were out, and the town was asleep. "I have something for you," he said, reaching into his pocket.

This time, the watch was new. Sleek silver, minimal design, the kind worn by professionals who moved with certainty. It gleamed softly in the moonlight; it was the best he could afford that time.

"It's not fancy," he said, echoing the words from years ago, "but it's sturdy. It won't stop on you."

Sarika ran her fingers along its frame. It was cool, unfamiliar, but she already felt the bond forming. "Why another watch?" she asked quietly.

He looked at her, eyes shining. "Because now, it's your turn. You've learned to respect time. Now go change it." The phrase startled her. "*Go change the time.*"

Not just follow it. Not just keep up. Change it.

She swallowed hard. "I'll try."

He shook his head. "No. Don't try. Do."

The next morning, as the train pulled away from her station, she glanced back at her parents standing hand in hand. Her mother waved with teary eyes. Her father, as always, stood still, but this time, he raised his wrist and pointed at his watch.

She smiled. She understood. Time was hers now, not just to keep, but to shape.

Over time, Sarika's respect for time morphed into something tighter, harsher, an obsession. What began as mindful discipline became a clockwork prison. She tracked her day in blocks, study, meals, revision, sleep. Every hour was accounted for. Her planner was color-coded by priority. She'd tick tasks off with satisfaction, but any delay, even a five-minute deviation, unsettled her deeply.

Weekends were pre-planned a week in advance. Leisure had a start and end time. Calls with home were fit into 15-minute slots. Sleep was calculated backwards from sunrise. Rest wasn't something she *felt*, it was something she *scheduled*. It was all very efficient. It was all very lonely.

Living in the present disappeared. She was always in the next moment, the next quiz, the next submission, the next internship application. Her mind was a map of what-ifs and to-dos. Joy came in the form of completed tasks, never from spontaneous laughter or an unplanned walk.

In college, she kept her circle minimal, two hostel mates she saw during laundry time, and two classmates she sat beside during lectures. They were good people, kind

enough for birthday wishes and quick coffee breaks. Just enough to not feel completely alone.

Her true best friend became coffee. Iced Americanos for all-nighters, cappuccinos before lectures, lattes on rare outings. Coffee wasn't just a drink; it was momentum in a cup. A signal to move, to do, to keep going.

Sometimes, she'd sit alone in a campus café, sipping slowly while staring at her to-do list. Watching the hands of her watch tick by, she felt both in control and perpetually behind.

She wore time like armor, but it had begun to tighten. And she didn't know yet that one day, it might crack.

Then came her first job.

A corporate setup nestled in a glass-and-concrete tower, where ambition wore crisp shirts and carried ID badges. The pace was relentless, but Sarika was built for it. She arrived ten minutes early every day, her tasks already prioritized. Her desktop was organized into folders with subfolders, her desk clear except for a planner and a cappuccino.

It was here that she met Raj.

Raj worked in the same office, different team, a few desks away. He was a quiet sort, not because he lacked opinions, but because he didn't waste words. His emails were precise, his jokes even more so. He wrapped up meetings before the scheduled end. He completed reports without reminders. But he did it all with an ease that unnerved her.

Sarika, who measured success in efficiency, didn't quite know how to handle someone who was both efficient and... unhurried. The apt word was chill for him.

At first, she didn't like him.

She'd roll her eyes at his jokes in meetings. Scoffed when their manager praised his work. "He's lucky," she muttered once to a colleague. "He probably sleeps through half his tasks."

But jealousy wears many masks. Hers looked like irritation. What bothered her most wasn't Raj's skill; it was his serenity. While she raced against the clock, he walked like time belonged to him. And yet, he noticed her.

One late evening, they stayed back to meet a tough deadline. The office had emptied, except for the cleaning staff and their glowing screens.

"You always work this late?" he asked, leaning over her cubicle.

Sarika didn't look up. "Only when needed."

"You think it's needed every day, huh?"

She paused. "Time doesn't respect the lazy."

He chuckled, not mockingly, but as though he'd heard an echo of himself from a few years ago. "Or maybe the lazy figured out something the rest haven't."

That night, he gave Sarika a lift on the way back. The silence between them wasn't awkward, it was curious. Like two people flipping through the same book but different chapters.

Over the next few weeks, conversations stretched beyond coffee breaks. They debated everything, office

culture, books, whether technology saved time or just restructured how it was wasted. Raj was observant. He noticed she added two spoons of sugar despite pretending to like her coffee bitter. He noticed her wristwatch and once asked, "Still ticking from your past?"

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"The watch. Looks old. Sentimental?"

Sarika glanced at it; it was still the same her father gave when she was leaving home. "It's from home."

He nodded as if he understood the full story without needing the words.

Love didn't strike like lightning. It grew slowly, like the quiet unfolding of a winter foggy morning. Their closeness wasn't dramatic; it was built in silences, shared songs, and passing smiles. He became her calm in the storm of deadlines.

One rainy Wednesday, Raj appeared at her desk holding a modest bouquet, wildflowers, wrapped in brown paper.

She froze. "Are these... for me?"

He grinned. "No, they're for your roommate. Of course, they're for you."

She took them reluctantly, unsure how to hold them. "They'll die soon. Why waste money?"

"That's the beauty of them", Raj empathetically explained. "Flowers are not supposed to last, they help us to stay in the present. They grow, they blossom, they thrive and they are gone. You have to be in the present, in the moment. Just enjoy, Now."

She stared at him. "So, we should enjoy things even if they don't last?"

"Especially then," he smiled.

That evening, Sarika didn't open her planner. She put the flowers in a water bottle and placed them on her windowsill. They looked out of place among her color-coded Post-Its and charging cables. But she kept them there.

Something had shifted inside her.

She understood his words. But to live them? That would take time. Still, for the first time in years, she felt no urgency to rush.

One golden afternoon, Sarika and Raj were strolling through a street market after a lazy lunch. The sky above was a canvas of soft blues and drifting clouds; the kind of sky that made you slow down. Hand in hand, they browsed through little antique shops and roadside stalls, leather journals, cotton scarves, and handcrafted jewelry. Sarika loved walking like this, aimless and free, the world offering itself in tiny windows of color and charm.

Then her eyes caught something through a shop window, a cobalt blue dial, a silver watch. Sleek, bracelet-style, elegant in its simplicity. The kind of accessory she would admire but never buy for herself. It was a big brand, and she wasn't sure she could splurge on it.

She paused, only for a second. But Raj noticed. He always did.

"You like it?" he asked. She looked away. "It's nice. A bit too flashy, maybe."

Raj stepped inside the store. She protested, half-heartedly, but it was already too late. He pulled her into the shop with love. Ten minutes later, they got a small shopping bag and that boyish grin that always melted her defenses.

“Raj...” she began. He handed it to her. “Don’t say anything. Just wear it.”

“It’s too much.”

“It’s just right.”

“It is expensive.”

He shrugged. “Love doesn’t come with a budget. Especially, that look in your eyes when you saw it.”

Sarika couldn’t argue with that. She wore it right then. The dial was cool against her skin, but it made her feel warm. For her, it wasn’t just a watch; it was a symbol. Not just of growth. Of being seen. Of love that noticed the tiny pauses and turned them into memories.

In the weeks that followed, the watch became part of her. It clinked gently as she typed emails, peeked through her sleeves during meetings, and gleamed under café lights when she lifted her coffee mug.

She started feeling more herself, even a freer version of herself, less bound by time, more in rhythm with it.

Not long after, Sarika decided to tell her parents about Raj.

Her mother listened quietly, her eyes soft. “He sounds like someone who’ll take care of you.”

Her father didn't say much at first, but when he finally spoke, it was with a smile. "You've always been wise with your time. I trust you'll be wise with your heart."

Raj's family was mostly welcoming, though Sarika sensed small tensions beneath the surface, polite silences, faint hesitations. It wasn't hostile, just guarded.

But it was Raj's older sister, Rima, who made her feel most at home.

Rima was warm and intuitive. A woman who had weathered her own battles, evident in the kindness behind her laughter. On their first meeting, Rima hugged Sarika like they were old friends. She had the rare ability to make you feel you belonged, without asking for explanations.

A few weeks later, during Sarika's first visit to Raj's home, she sat in their sunlit living room, sipping cold coffee Raj had made for her. Raj's family was in town to meet her. The room smelled of sandalwood and old books. Family photos lined the wall, graduation frames, wedding pictures, faded childhood portraits.

She was wearing the cobalt blue-silver watch. Raj's mother, a graceful woman with sharp eyes and a softer voice, sat across from her, observing. Midway through the conversation, her gaze fell to Sarika's wrist. There was a pause.

"You like expensive things," she said casually, not unkind, but edged with something Sarika couldn't name. Sarika froze for a moment, unsure of what to say.

Before she could reply, Raj leaned forward, smiling. "She likes good things."

Rima, sitting beside their mother, caught Sarika's eye and winked; an unspoken alliance passed in a second.

Sarika felt the air shift. Not in a dramatic way, but in a way that mattered. She felt safe. Held. Like she wasn't alone in navigating the subtle, intricate dance of merging families.

Later that night, as they walked back to her car, Raj said softly, "You okay?"

Sarika nodded. "She's just... still figuring me out."

"She will," he said, "And until then, I've already figured you in."

Her fingers brushed the edge of her watch. The cobalt dial caught the moonlight.

For the first time in a long time, time felt like something soft. Something shared.

They got married in a small town nestled among mango orchards and sun-drenched fields, just a few kilometres from Raj's childhood home. The wedding was a blur of color and chaos, marigold garlands, brass bands, and endless aunties adjusting their dupattas. The baraat was late by two hours, thanks to an impromptu dance battle on the dusty road.

For the first time in her life, Sarika didn't mind. As she stood waiting in the makeshift mandap under fairy lights, she laughed with her friends. "What can I do? No point stressing. It'll happen when it happens."

One of them raised an eyebrow. "Who are you and what have you done with Sarika?" "Marriage," another teased. "She's gone soft."

Maybe they were right. Or maybe she was simply learning to let go.

The rituals went on for hours. Varmala, sindoor, and a hundred whispered instructions from elders. Sarika floated through it all, a little tired, a little dazed, but mostly full, of hope, of wonder, of something new blooming quietly inside her.

After the wedding, they reached Raj's house late at night. The post-wedding rituals began the next morning with sleepy smiles and sweet rice. Sarika sat in the living room in a new saree, her hands still stained with mehendi, when her mother-in-law walked in holding big and small velvet boxes.

She opened it and revealed gold jewelries and a delicate rose gold watch. Thin, elegant, with a shimmer that caught the morning sun.

"This is for you," she said, placing it on Sarika's wrist. "From now on, follow our traditions. Our way of doing things." There was no warning in her tone, only warmth. A gentle, motherly authority. Sarika smiled and nodded. "Thank you, Ma." She meant it. The gesture felt loving. The watch felt symbolic, a passing of the baton. She wore it with grace and gratitude.

But over the following weeks, something shifted.

The watch, so light on her wrist, began to feel heavy. Not because of its weight, but because of what it came to represent. It wasn't about time anymore. It was about whose time.

Wake up at 5. Make tea before anyone else. Learn the recipes by heart. Touch the elders' feet each morning. Smile through the rituals. Don't talk too loudly. Don't wear

jeans in the kitchen. Don't nap in the afternoon. Every day was a schedule not made by her, but for her.

The rose gold watch ticked away her freedom, one minute at a time.

She tried. God, she tried. Sarika wanted to be a good daughter-in-law. She told herself she was adjusting, learning, evolving. But slowly, a quiet ache grew within her. A bending of the spine, not from work, but from the constant shape-shifting of her spirit.

Raj noticed the change.

One evening, a month after the wedding, Sarika was folding laundry in their room when she paused, sat down, and looked at him. "I want to talk," she said softly. Raj sat up immediately. "What's wrong?"

"I'm trying, Raj. Really. But it's like... I've lost my time. Everything is so pre-decided. And I feel clipped. Like I'm always watching myself." He reached for her hand. "Why didn't you say anything before?"

"I didn't want to be difficult," she whispered. "Everyone's so kind. But kindness can also be a cage." He nodded, thoughtful. "You're not wrong. But we'll fix this."

The next morning, Raj spoke to his mother. At first, there was silence. Then she said, "Does she not like us?"

"No, Ma. She likes us. She just wants balance. She's not here to erase your ways, just to find space for hers." To everyone's surprise, Rima joined in. "She needs space to breathe, Ma. She's not breaking anything. She's building something. With us."

The mother-in-law didn't reply immediately. But that evening, when Sarika brought her tea, she took her hand

and said, “You don’t have to follow everything blindly,” her mother-in-law added, gently. “Keep what makes sense. Leave the rest. Just don’t forget your roots.”

Tears welled up in Sarika’s eyes. Not from hurt this time, but from being understood. That night, she removed the rose gold watch and placed it on her dresser. Then she picked up her cobalt blue one. It didn’t match her saree. But it matched her mood.

It wasn’t a rebellion. It was a balance.

After 2 years at her workplace, Sarika had earned a quiet reputation for being the most punctual person in the office. She was never late for a meeting, never missed a deadline. Colleagues joked that her inner clock was synced with the atomic one in Geneva. On her fifth work anniversary, her team surprised her with a sleek, high-end watch, a shiny gold dial, an encrusted strap, and too many crystals for her taste.

It wasn’t her style. Too flashy, too loud. But she smiled as they slipped it on her wrist and clapped. She didn’t love the watch. Just like she didn’t love her job anymore. But she valued the gesture, the camaraderie, the safety net that came with routine. She had spent years building this life, carefully arranged, meticulously timed.

That weekend, Sarika accompanied her colleague Sona for anniversary shopping. Sarika didn’t know Sona too well, but they got along, and she welcomed the break from routine. Sona was full of energy, trying on designer gowns, critiquing embroidery, comparing necklines. After hours of hopping through shops, they stopped at a watch counter tucked inside a shopping mall.

Sarika smiled and teased, "You'll get watch as gift soon," as she knew office is planning on it. Sona grinned, brushing hair off her forehead. "I always buy my own watch."

Later, over coffee and quinoa salad at a small café, Sarika was curious. The day had been light-hearted, but something about Sona's words lingered. Sipping her latte, she gently asked, "Why don't you wear the gifted ones?"

Sona's mouth was full of the salad she ordered; she was starving after the shopping trip. She chewed thoughtfully, taking her time before replying. "I wear them very occasionally," she said finally, her tone casual. "Mostly during some functions, matching with my dress." She paused, sipping her cold coffee. Then she looked up and met Sarika's eyes. "You know, watches don't show time. *They tell your time.*"

Sarika blinked.

"I like to be in control of my time," Sona continued. Her voice wasn't preachy, just clear. Grounded. She took another bite, still smiling. "That's why I buy the best watch I can afford. Maybe a good watch will bring a good time." She giggled while munching, amused by her own half-joke.

Sarika didn't say a word.

She just stared out of the window, the clatter of the café fading into a quiet hum. Her mind wasn't in the café anymore; it had drifted somewhere deeper.

The sentence echoed: *Watches don't show time. They tell your time.*

She thought of the watches she owned. The first one her mother's, then her father gifted her when she was

leaving home. The silver one when she left for college. The cobalt blue dialed bracelet watch from Raj. The rose gold one from her mother-in-law. And now this latest one from her office team.

All beautiful. All meaningful. But none were chosen by her. Or maybe only the one Raj gifted her, and this strengthened her thought.

But she hadn't bought a single watch for herself in her whole life; they were timelines gifted to her. Each one marking a phase in life she had dutifully walked into. That night, as she sat on the bed with the new watch still on her wrist, Sarika realized something quiet, yet seismic.

It was time to choose her own time now.

With a deep breath, she reached for her laptop and began browsing. Not for brands, not for trends. She searched for something that spoke to her. A timepiece, yes, but also a symbol. She found it after nearly an hour. A minimalist Scandinavian design. Matte black watch with a single diamond at the twelve mark. No numerals, no distractions. Clean, sharp, intentional.

It was expensive. Too expensive for her usual choices. But something inside her whispered: *It's time.*

Three days later, the parcel arrived. That evening, over dinner with Raj, she placed the velvet box on the table next to the dal and roti. He looked up, curious "You bought a watch?" he asked.

She opened the box and held it up to the light. The diamond caught the glow from the kitchen pendant lamp, flickering like a tiny constellation. "It's beautiful," he said softly.

Sarika took a breath. "I've followed every timeline society has framed for me. School. College. Marriage. Job. I don't regret it. I'm happy, Raj. But..." She paused, searching for the right words.

"But I want more. I want to finally listen to the voice I've ignored for years. I want to start my design business. I want to create things with my hands. Sketch, explore, design. Not just project management or follow emails."

Raj looked at her, not surprised, but deeply moved. There was pride in his eyes, but also something more, relief, maybe. That she had finally said it out loud. "And your job?" he asked gently.

"I'll manage both for now. But I'll decide with time. Not out of fear. Not out of pressure. Out of clarity." Sarika answered.

Raj reached for her hand across the table. "Whatever you choose, I'm here. Always."

Sarika smiled. It wasn't a grand moment. No violins played in the background. The curry was still hot, the fan still creaked, and their plates were half-full. But something had shifted. A quiet revolution had begun.

Later that night, she wore her new watch and stepped out onto the balcony. The wind tousled her hair; the city twinkled beneath her. She closed her eyes and touched the diamond on the dial.

It didn't tick loudly. It didn't scream for attention. But it pulsed with presence. With purpose.

She thought of her younger self, the girl who wore a steel watch to exams hoping for confidence, the college student who measured her rest in twenty-minute slots, the

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newlywed trying to meet everyone's expectations, the employee striving for milestones that no longer inspired her.

She had lived their time.

Now, she would live hers.

This time, the time was hers.

The Taste of Trust

By the time Yash was ten, he had already decided that food wasn't just a part of life; it was life.

Yash loved food. Always had.

As a boy, his favourite part of any family get-together was not games, not gifts, not even cousins; it was the food. Functions at home meant the house would transform into a buzzing kitchen temple. The air would hum with the rhythm of pressure cookers, steel plates clinking, and the sizzle of hot oil. Laughter mingled with the aromas of cumin, asafoetida, and fried snacks.

The day began with puffed puris and potato curry, moved into rounds of crispy fritters, and closed with chilled kheer, thick with cardamom and slivered almonds. But nothing ever came close to his grandmother's jalebis.

She made them especially for him, hot, golden spirals dipped in saffron syrup. Yash would stand on tiptoe by the counter, watching her pour the batter in imperfect circles.

"Extra crispy, just for you," she'd say with a smile, sliding the jalebis onto a plate lined with butter paper. He never needed an invitation.

While most kids played tag on the terrace or chased each other through the stairs, Yash hovered near the kitchen, not for the company of adults but for the

proximity to the next batch of snacks. His aunts would often glance at him and laugh.

“He’s more interested in frying pans than footballs,” one would remark.

Another would nudge him affectionately, “Yash, are you sure you don’t want to be a chef someday?” He shrugged, too busy stealing a freshly fried pakora to answer.

Holi was his favourite festival. The colours were fun, sure, but it was the food that made it unforgettable: malpuas soaked in syrup, flaky gujiyas filled with sweetened khoya, and pitchers of chilled thandai. It was the one day when everyone let go, when indulgence was encouraged, not questioned.

Yash made it his mission to sample everything. He had a sixth sense for knowing exactly when a tray was being taken out of the kitchen. One year, his mother caught him sneaking a malpua before it had even cooled.

“You’re going to burn your tongue one day,” she warned, half amused. “Worth it,” he replied with a grin.

By his early teens, Yash had become something of a local food expert. He could tell you which vendor sold the crispiest samosas, where to find the best chocolate pastry, and which roadside stall made chaat that tasted like fireworks.

Even family friends sought his opinion.

“Yash, where should we get sweets for the birthday party?”, asked one of his uncles. “There’s a place near Centre Market,” he replied confidently. “They use real saffron. You can taste the difference.”

Food wasn't just something Yash consumed; it was something he noticed, remembered, and felt. A perfectly balanced chutney made him pause. A bad batch of idlis made him quietly disappointed. He paid attention to textures, temperatures, and pairings. He loved it all, the planning, the presentation, the joy it brought to people when served right.

For Yash, food was never just about hunger. It was about emotion. It meant love when his grandmother quietly placed a second helping of halwa on his plate. It meant comfort when his mother packed his lunchbox with neatly cut mangoes in summer. It meant celebration, community, identity.

He didn't yet know that this deep love of food would one day lead him to rethink how he lived, how he chose, and eventually, how he trusted life itself.

But for now, he was simply the boy who believed every memory worth keeping began with something delicious.

Moving to the city was supposed to be a new chapter, a new job, a new home, and, as Yash quickly discovered, a whole new relationship with food.

In his village, meals, especially during weddings or festivals, were more like rituals. People sat cross-legged in neat rows on the ground, disposable plates in front of them. Volunteers would move along the line with ladles and buckets, offering puri, sweets, vegetables, rice, salad, one dish at a time. You never quite knew what was coming next. You could always ask for seconds, but there was a sense of quiet restraint, a rhythm to the way food was served and received.

Then he discovered the buffet.

The first time was at a team dinner, just after he started his first job in the city. The restaurant had chandeliers, live music, and what looked like a never-ending spread of dishes. Dozens of counters with tiny labels: Thai Green Curry, Butter Chicken, Pasta Alfredo, Dimsums, Sushi, Pani Puri shots. To Yash, it was overwhelming and magical all at once.

He approached the buffet with the excitement of a child let loose in a candy store. He loaded his plate with everything that caught his eye: butter naan with schetzwan noodles, pink sauce pasta with biryani, and an unnecessary, but tempting, helping of Caesar salad.

Every bite was bursting with flavour. Spicy, creamy, tangy, sweet. But the problem was, they all competed. One overpowered the other. He'd finish his plate only to remember something he hadn't tried. He'd go back, again and again, refilling out of curiosity, greed, or just that lingering fear of missing out.

At the end of each meal, he felt full. Uncomfortably so. But not quite satisfied.

That pattern continued for months, then years. Buffets became his weekend treat, his social outing, his coping mechanism. Different places, different themes, but oddly, the same outcome. He'd leave each time with a heavy stomach and a hollow feeling.

The abundance had stopped feeling luxurious. It felt loud, chaotic, excessive.

As he grew older, something in him began to shift.

He started noticing how the cuisines clashed, sushi next to dal makhani, spaghetti rubbing shoulders with seekh kebabs. Flavours that were exquisite on their own

became noise when stacked together. The thrill of "having it all" had dulled. The excitement of twenty types of desserts ended with indecision, followed by guilt.

And always, always, that one lingering thought: *Did I eat enough? Did I miss something? Should I have had one more bite of that brownie?*

He noticed how the buffet wasn't just about food anymore. It was a mirror to how he was approaching life. Grabbing at everything, unsure what he truly wanted, sampling without savoring.

He started to feel a quiet exhaustion, at work, in friendships, even with himself. Like he was constantly in line, plate in hand, piling more when he hadn't even finished what he already had.

What was he chasing? Variety? Validation? A sense of arrival?

Buffets had offered him the illusion of freedom. But freedom without clarity, he realized, was just noise.

He remembered the meals at home in his childhood, quiet, seasonal, thoughtful. When his mother served a single bowl of *kadhi* with rice and that one perfect roasted papad on the side. No chaos. No abundance. Just enough. And somehow, everything tasted more alive then.

Yash didn't give up buffets overnight. But he stopped chasing them. Slowly, he found himself looking for simpler places. The shift wasn't dramatic. It was subtle. But it made all the difference.

He was learning that more wasn't always better.

Sometimes, it was just... more.

This change came with a shift, both in life and in taste.

When Yash met Sona, everything began to feel more intentional. She was calm where he was chaotic, curious where he was restless. With her, he discovered a slower rhythm to life. Weekend brunches turned into museum strolls. Sunday markets became their ritual. He started noticing the brushstrokes in a painting, the silence between notes in a violin recital, the way shadows fell on her face when she read by the window.

His appetite changed, too.

Buffets began to feel noisy, too much choice, too little meaning. Instead, he started gravitating toward thalis. A single cuisine. A curated plate. A perfect circle of katoris, each offering something distinct: sweet mango pickle, creamy dal, a sharp tamarind chutney, two crisp puris, a spoon of warm ghee on steamed rice.

There was comfort in the structure. Predictability. A kind of quiet discipline. You weren't choosing endlessly; you were receiving. And yet, you were in control. You could ask for a second puri, a little more sabzi. He liked that balance, freedom, but within limits.

But still, something felt... incomplete.

Some days, the puris were too few. Other days, the dal ran out too soon. He'd ask for more, not out of hunger, but out of hope, that maybe just a little extra would tip the scale toward satisfaction. Yet more often than not, he ended up uncomfortably full, chasing that elusive harmony between desire and contentment.

The thali brought him closer to something deeper — ritual, order, rootedness.

But the craving still lingered. Quiet now, but present.

As if the soul knew: even beautifully plated meals can miss the mark when you're still trying to control the portions of your life.

It wasn't a sudden storm; it was a quiet, unfolding comfort. She introduced him to a different kind of living, slower, mindful, curated. And a new way of eating.

Bowls of smoothie, toast with avocado and seeds he hadn't heard of, and teas that smelled like forests.

For as long as Yash could remember, food had been his comfort, his celebration, his identity. But somewhere along the way, the thing he loved most started turning into a wedge between him and the person he loved most, Sona, who was now his wife.

In the beginning, it was subtle. She'd pass on the second helping of butter chicken. He'd order chocolate lava cake while she sipped her green tea. He admired how disciplined she was, how she read labels at the grocery store, measured olive oil with a spoon, and made smoothies with things he couldn't pronounce.

But admiration soon gave way to friction.

"You ordered butter naan again?" she asked one night as they sat down at a cozy rooftop restaurant. The city lights flickered below, but the mood between them was dim.

"Yeah. What else would I eat with paneer tikka?" Yash said, a little defensively.

"You could try brown rice. Or even some salad for a change. Do we have to go all out every time?" He sighed. "It's a dinner out, not a detox camp."

Sona looked away. "It's not about naan, Yash. It's always the same thing. You don't even try."

That night, they didn't speak much on the way home. It wasn't just about food; it never really is, but food had become the metaphor. The reminder of how different they had grown.

For Yash, food had always been joy, something you didn't question. But now, it was beginning to feel like a battleground.

Distance

Until one quiet evening, their fifth anniversary.

Yash made dinner plans. Not at their usual place, but at a small, slow food restaurant Sona had once mentioned in passing. The menu was seasonal and surprisingly simple.

There was no butter naan. No tikka. Just roasted pumpkin soup, a quinoa risotto, a hint of chili, dark chocolate mousse, and silence between courses.

"I thought you'd pick something more... spicy," Sona smiled.

"I wanted something... slower," Yash replied.

He took a breath. "I know food was always my first love. But life gave me you. And maybe loving you taught me that love isn't about holding on to what's familiar, it's about growing into what's needed."

They ate in silence for a while. This time, not because of distance. But because everything was finally right. Each bite was full of intention, respect, and a quiet kind of joy.

As the evening unfolded, they didn't speak much about food. They spoke about them. About how life was shifting. How they missed late-night movies. How routine had crept into things that once felt magical. But also, how

grateful they were to still sit across from each other and listen, still willing to grow, still choosing one another.

That night, something shifted in Yash, not dramatically, but honestly.

He realised that food had always taught him things, but he had never really listened.

He thought back to the buffet days, how he chased everything, afraid to miss out, piling plates, confusing excess for joy.

Then to the thali phase, structured, measured, but still searching for the right balance, always wanting just one more bite of something.

And now... now he wanted something else.

Not fullness.

Wholeness.

He began changing, not out of guilt, but out of love.

One step at a time.

He started cooking, not just for himself, but for Sona. Grilled chicken with lemon and herbs instead of butter-fried. Khichdi with ghee and spinach. A Sunday ritual of making ragi pancakes. He added a “healthier twist” to his favourites, not because he was giving up on his roots, but because he was expanding his plate, and his heart.

“Who are you, and what have you done with my butter-loving husband?” Sona laughed one evening as he garnished a zucchini pasta with toasted seeds.

“Still me,” he said. “Just... low fat now.”

She smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I love every version of you."

They began sitting at the table again, not just eating, but being. Slowing down. Chewing. Talking. Learning.

Then one day, Yash's perspective on food and life shifted entirely.

It was their tenth anniversary. This time, Sona had chosen the place. Not their usual restaurant, not comfort food, but something entirely different: a reservation at one of the country's most celebrated fine-dining restaurants, known for its chef's tasting menu.

"No choices?" Yash asked as they drove there. "That's... new."

"No choices," Sona smiled. "Just trust."

He wasn't sure. After all, how much could a few delicate bites of unfamiliar ingredients move him? But something in her eyes, excited, hopeful, made him want to believe.

They were seated at a candlelit corner table. A soft piano played in the background. The menu for the evening was absent. The experience, they were told, would unfold course by course.

The first course arrived.

A delicate amuse-bouche of beetroot tartare topped with goat cheese mousse was placed before them like a jewel. Yash raised an eyebrow. "That's it?" he whispered.

But the moment it touched his tongue, his eyes widened. The earthy beet, the creamy tang of the cheese, and the faint citrus note sang in harmony. "Wow," he murmured, genuinely surprised. "That was... unexpected."

Sona laughed gently. “I think we’re in for a memorable night.”

The second course looked more like art than food. A translucent raviolo rested on a swirl of carrot purée and lemongrass consommé, garnished with edible petals and oil drops like brushstrokes.

They ate slowly, reverently, like they were tasting memory itself, subtle, layered, intimate.

The third course offered a choice: roasted chops with spiced plum glaze or wild mushroom risotto infused with truffle oil.

“You know I love mushrooms,” Sona said, eyeing the chops longingly.

“Let’s do both,” Yash smiled. “We’ll share.”

The fourth course followed suit: seared scallops over cauliflower purée, or handmade spinach and ricotta ravioli in sage brown butter. Again, they chose both.

Each dish brought them closer, not just in flavor, but in feeling. They spoke between bites about childhood memories, kitchen mishaps, unspoken dreams. With each plate, something opened between them. It wasn’t just dinner. It was communion.

Then came the final course.

Inside the Kintsugi bowl was a single dessert: a round *doodh jalebi*, jalebi infused with pista, chuara and kesar milk, resting in a small pool of Rabri and saffron foam, sprinkled with pistachios and almonds. It was minimal, familiar, quiet.

Yash took a bite.

Soft. Crispy. Bright. A little earthy, a little sweet. And comforting. Like monsoon days from his childhood. Like sunlight on cold skin.

He looked up, eyes moist.

Sona noticed. "What is it?"

"I don't know," he whispered. "It just... feels like everything."

That night, for the first time, he didn't feel full. He felt whole.

He realised the secret to a good life wasn't in finding the perfect dish.

But in learning to savour whatever was served, with grace, with gratitude, and with someone willing to pass you the salt, just the way you like it. He believed, and the Universe served him his childhood best.

That night, as Yash walked beside Sona under a sky scattered with stars, hand in hand, his heart felt light in a way he hadn't known in years.

He wasn't just walking off a good meal. He was walking into a new way of seeing life.

He had spent years treating life like a buffet, grabbing at everything, afraid to miss out, piling his plate with experiences, achievements, approval. More was always better. But the more he added, the more he forgot to taste. He was full, yes. But not nourished.

Then came the thali phase, structured, disciplined, rooted in balance. But even then, he tried to control everything. Micromanage portions of joy. Add extra puris of ambition. Skip the sabzi of stillness. It brought order, but not peace.

But tonight was different. Tonight, he finally understood:

Life is a tasting menu.

Curated. Intentional. A quiet unfolding.

You don't get to choose every course. You don't always see what's next.

But each bite, each moment, is designed to arrive *just when you're ready for it*.

Some are small, surprising, and vivid. Others are slow, subtle, and soul-deep. Some might confuse you. Some will change you. But they all belong.

He didn't need to chase anymore.

Or fear what was missing.

He just needed to trust the chef, the process, the timing.

Trust life. Trust love. Trust the universe.

And somehow, ever since that night, he hasn't needed to search for more.

Because when you stop trying to fill every space...

You finally realize:

You've been full all along.

The Window

The afternoon sun filtered through the sheer curtains of their new living room, casting long golden stripes across the white marble floor. Diya ran her fingers along the edge of the windowpane, still surprised by how quiet it was despite being a multi-storey apartment complex in the heart of the city.

Raunak stepped in, balancing a carton labelled "*Fragile - Kitchen Stuff*" in bold black letters.

"You sure this is where you want the mugs?" he asked, already sweating slightly.

Diya turned and smiled. "They belong in the kitchen, Mr. Fragile."

They both laughed.

This was *their house*, the first they'd chosen together. Every single decision, from the shade of the walls to the type of indoor plants, had been made with equal excitement and childlike awe.

"Bedrooms not facing each other, balconies with privacy... It's almost like this place respects space," Diya had remarked when they first visited the building.

“And importantly, the balcony is not open on the road; we can enjoy our quality evenings here, free of noise and pollution,” Raunak had replied.

They moved in with more dreams than furniture. Diya brought along her collection of half-read books and herbal teas, and Raunak brought his guitar and optimism. Most days were spent unpacking boxes and trying to agree on wall hangings.

“This Buddha painting goes in the bedroom,” she said, holding it up. “No, no. That’s for the living room. It’s soothing. People should feel Zen as soon as they walk in.” “People?” She raised an eyebrow. “As in?” “As in... future guests. Old friends, Relatives. Whoever shows up.”, Raunak clarified.

Those early days were filled with shared meals on floor cushions, late-night chai on the balcony, and more arguments over curtain shades. It felt like falling in love again, this time with a space they were building together.

It was the first home they chose as a couple. After years of living in Raunak’s family home, where everything, from the couch covers to the dinner schedule, was pre-decided, this was freedom. Terrifying, fragile, delicious freedom. They had signed the papers and got the keys a few weeks ago.

The initial weeks flew by like a dream. Mornings started with Diya brewing herbal tea while soft instrumental music played from her phone. Raunak would walk around with a checklist of what was still pending: curtain rods, doormats, which Wi-Fi router to choose, and Diya, with her usual calm, took things one step at a time.

Sometimes they sat on the balcony in the evenings, watching dusky skies turn into navy blue. There weren't many neighbors yet. Most flats were booked, but still vacant. The silence was comforting, like a blank slate.

One evening, Raunak brought home a plant, a tall Areca palm in a grey ceramic pot.

"Our first official plant," he announced proudly. Diya took it from him gently, feeling its leaves. "You know this one is known to purify air and reduce stress." "Perfect," he said. "We could use less of both."

They had tea in the balcony that night, the plant standing between them like a green totem of fresh beginnings, next to the wind chime she had picked from a roadside stall.

"I hope we make good memories here," she said.

Raunak turned to her. "We already are."

But like all new things, the sheen began to fade around the edges. The carton boxes disappeared, replaced by weekly groceries and excess water bottles in corners that needed sorting. Raunak returned home later now longer work hours, and office calls at odd times. Diya found herself filling the silence with podcasts or the clinking of dishes.

Most homes in the society were booked, but few were occupied. The building had a hollow silence in the corridors, echoing more than just footsteps.

A few months later, neighbors began arriving. One flat next to them was taken by bachelors, polite but distant. Then came the new owners in the adjacent flat. A couple. They moved in during Kartik month, right before Diwali.

There was bustle for a few days, the sound of drills and movers, then quiet again.

Diya especially loved the mornings.

She'd rise before the others, wrap herself in her old cotton robe, and walk into the kitchen barefoot. Her tiny ritual of warm water with turmeric, pepper, and ghee made her feel anchored. It wasn't much, but it was hers. The silence of dawn, the whispering kettle, the city outside still asleep it felt like a kind of prayer.

And then one morning, the silence shifted.

She saw her.

A woman. About her age. Slender frame, elegant hands. Dressed in a crisp kurti, explaining something to a house-help with practiced authority. Diya blinked. The woman looked up, met her gaze for the briefest second, then turned away.

Diya realized then: the kitchens shared a view. *That must be the new neighbor.*

While the bedrooms and balconies were strategically placed for privacy, the kitchen had no such grace. The distance was respectable, but not blind. Close enough to catch a whiff of someone's cooking, far enough to avoid accidental small talk. Still, the window offered something more personal, a glimpse into routine, into who someone was when they thought no one was looking.

The next few days, Diya saw her again, always dressed well, always appearing purposeful, professional. Sometimes she laughed lightly while talking to someone inside, other times she appeared distracted, typing furiously into her phone, pausing only to sip water from a glass tumbler.

It wasn't envy exactly, but something adjacent.

The golden rustic clock on the kitchen wall struck 6:10 AM. Diya rubbed her eyes and shuffled toward the sink. The house was still quiet. Raunak's alarm hadn't gone off, and their daughter was tucked into her blanket like a burrito.

She opened the window for fresh air, her reflex. The soft breeze was cool on her cheeks.

Across the divide, Sona stood in her kitchen, pouring water into a kettle. Her hair was tied into a quick bun, lipstick slightly smudged, but she still looked like someone who had it all together. The help was working as per her instructions, at least what Diya could perceive from her occasional glimpse. A large insulated lunchbox stood on the slab next to her. She was clearly packing it for work. A man walked into her kitchen, said something, and she nodded, handing over the lunchbox. He kissed her on the forehead and left.

So that's her husband. Diya's fingers tightened around her teacup. She turned away quickly. It felt wrong to look, like watching a moment that you weren't supposed to be part of.

Later that day, Diya stood near the fridge, contemplating whether to make khichdi or order something for lunch. She leaned against the counter, sighing.

"I could use help," she mumbled. She thought again of hiring a cook.

But last time... She remembered how Raunak had stopped finishing his meals when they hired someone during her pregnancy. He never complained. Never said a

word. But the food would come back half-eaten. He only said "It's fine" when she asked. Guilt crept in like damp in the monsoon.

That evening, Raunak stood at the door holding grocery bags.

"Why do you look like you've fought a food war?" he teased. She looked up with a tired smile. "Because I have. Every day. With pulses, oil, roti dough... and the clock." He placed the bags on the counter and kissed her forehead. "I'll learn to cook. I promise. You teach me."

"You say this every Diwali," she chuckled.

"Well, good. Diwali's close."

Sona sat with Yash for dinner; both hunched over screens or waiting for the microwave beep. She started a conversation, "I miss cooking together. I miss your experiments in the kitchen".

"This curry tastes like cardboard," she snapped later.

Yash looked up.

"Order something, dear," he said gently, placing his phone down.

Sona sighed. Another packet of dimsum. Another disposable container.

Diya's eyes flicked toward the colorful delivery bags that were placed on the other kitchen slab every other night. Bright reds, yellows, the names of popular food chains sprawled across the labels.

Must be nice... she thought. *To not think twice before tapping 'Order Now'.*

Diya had always managed their finances well, but one salary made choices tight. Every splurge had to be justified. Raunak never said no, but she knew where they stood. So, she managed. Like every woman she grew up watching.

“Benefits of double income,” she murmured again.

Meanwhile, Diya’s kitchen looked like an Instagram photo. Polished steel jars. Floating candles in brass bowls. Her daughter, painting beside her on the kitchen floor.

Sona caught glimpses sometimes from the kitchen window. And it stung. Not out of envy. But longing.

She once told Yash, out of nowhere, “Diya looks like one of those main characters from serials. Always polished. That calm. And her kitchen...” Yash grunted, amused. “You like her, or her kitchen?” They both laughed.

But Sona couldn’t deny the truth. She did want that kind of presence. That stillness.

One late evening, Diya saw Sona through the window again. She was simply drinking water but had a weary look about her.

Across the slab, Diya was serving her daughter hot dal-rice in a silver bowl.

“Mumma, did you know today was story time in school?” her daughter chirped.

“No! That sounds exciting. Which one did you narrate?”

“The angry crow!” she giggled.

Diya smiled, feeling the calm her daughter’s smile brought.

Sona watched the scene from her window, just a peek, and her heart softened.

She picked up her phone and tapped open her photo album. A picture of her daughter Amy, beamed back. She was smiling, dressed in her school uniform, with a large campus building in the background. She was in a premier boarding school, one they had to work years to afford. They both missed her terribly.

She whispered, "Hope you're sleeping well, baby," and blinked back a tear.

That weekend, Diya and Raunak attended a society Diwali function where they officially met the new neighbors. Names floated across the lawn: introductions, awkward smiles, sugary greetings. That was the first time Diya and Sona exchanged names.

"Hi, I'm Diya.", she extended her hand.

"Sona. Finally, good to meet the woman behind the spotless kitchen," Sona said lightly.

Diya laughed, a little awkwardly. "And the woman with the best food deliveries in the block."

They both smiled, realizing how long they had silently observed each other's lives from opposite ends of the same wall. Both women watched each other like muted reflections.

Diya saw Sona's fresh flowers arrive every Monday. Yash would pick them on the way from work. Budget blooms, but thoughtful. Diya sighed quietly. Raunak never brought her flowers, though he watered the tulsi without fail.

Sona saw Diya kneading dough with her daughter's small hands beside hers. She remembered sending her daughter to boarding school. The guilt never left. It had been the best decision, but the ache remained.

They never spoke. Not more than a hello at Diwali gatherings. But they knew each other's rhythms like neighboring clock towers.

That night, while folding clothes, she thought of her old office. Her desk. The long HR meetings she used to secretly enjoy. She remembered how she used to have business cards with her name in bold. *Diya – HR Manager*.

She looked at her reflection in the wardrobe mirror. Slight grey strands at the temple. A small turmeric stain on her kurta. And yet... a softness in her face that only comes from giving.

Diya was keen to restart her journey to the outside world again. She had to take a break to take care of her ailing mother, then their daughter was born and then she didn't even realise but years passed, taking care of the home. She changed with time so much that sometimes even she forgot who she was. Raunak was always supportive, but he got so busy in his routines that he missed hearing the unsaid.

Sona was at her laptop, the screen casting a pale glow on her face. Word documents open, unread emails piling. Her back ached. Her temples throbbed.

Yash walked in with two bowls of chicken salad.

"Dinner à la chef," he joked, setting them on the table.

She barely looked up. "We can't keep doing this."

"What?"

“Surviving.”

He sighed, sitting beside her. “This is just a phase.”

“We’ve said that for five years,” she said, voice low. “And I’ve said goodbye to my passion each time.” He touched her shoulder gently. “You’ve been amazing. At home. At work. With our girl’s admission.”

“I don’t want to be amazing anymore, Yash. I want to feel *alive*.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

Finally, she added, “Do you remember how we used to cook together?”

“Vividly. We were not rich, in love, and you never approved of my experiments,” he smiled.

She didn’t smile back. “I never knew I would ever miss that so much.”

That night, she took out a small wooden box from the bookshelf. Inside were old bookmarks, some old photographs, and a notebook labeled “Dreams & Drafts.” She flipped to the first page.

“I want to write stories that taste like home.”

Tears rolled down silently. She didn’t wipe them.

A few days later, they both found themselves in their respective kitchens at the same time. Morning sun filtered in through the windows.

Sona stood with a water bottle in hand, still in her formal shirt. Diya had a mixing bowl of batter.

Sona’s eyes drifted to the small rangoli near Diya’s sink, simple, floral. Fresh marigold petals were placed

neatly near the window. A tiny vase stood with two fresh roses.

She smiled. *She must love flowers...*

Diya caught the glance. Her eyes wandered to Sona's elegant gold wristwatch; her leather handbag placed on the slab.

She must love classy accessories...

They looked away at the same time.

Later that evening, Diya sat on the sofa reading a book while Raunak typed away on his laptop.

"Have you noticed Sona?" she asked suddenly. Raunak looked up. "Our neighbor?"

"She reminds me of a character from one of those shows. Always well dressed, so composed."

"She must be trying hard, or maybe it's natural," he shrugged.

She nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe."

Raunak smirked. "Do you like her or her clothes?" Diya laughed. "Both..." She replied.

Meanwhile, in their flat, Sona was unpacking a delivery bag when she paused.

"Yash?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think Diya's judging me for all this food delivery?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you care?"

"I don't know. I just..." She paused. "She makes it look so graceful. That slow life. That peace."

Yash sat beside her. "Maybe she envies you too."

She looked at him, surprised.

Kartik month had arrived again, and with it came a city-wide glittering streets bursting with lights, marigolds braided into door frames, and diyas lining windowsills. The society, too, had transformed. The bland grey corridors now glowed under fairy lights, and laughter echoed through balconies.

Diya stood in the center of her living room, adjusting the pleats of her saree. A yellow saree, she recently wore in a family function, the one Raunak always said made her look like "someone straight out of a Bollywood movie."

"Mumma, I can't find the glitter glue!" her daughter shouted from the other room.

"It's in your craft box, darling. Third drawer."

She pinned a mogra gajra into her hair and smiled at her reflection. Tonight, Sarika from C-154 was hosting the "Ladies Diwali Meet." She didn't know her well, but their husbands were childhood friends, so she got the invite. It was a perfect excuse for samosas, laughter, and finally putting faces to names everyone only knew from the WhatsApp group.

Sona, on the other side, was struggling with her necklace clasp.

"Yash, help!"

He walked in, dressed in a crisp white kurta, holding a gift box. "You look like a goddess to me in this green color. My favourite!"

She laughed and turned. He fastened the clasp with gentle fingers.

"You nervous?" he asked.

"A little. I hardly know anyone. Except Sarika, I don't wanna feel left out, so I am taking Aisha with me." Aisha, Sona's sister who came to celebrate Diwali with them.

"You'll charm them, like always."

She raised an eyebrow. "Like always?"

He kissed her cheek. "Go make some new friends, bookworm."

Sarika's house was buzzing. The air was thick with the scent of sandalwood incense and freshly fried gujiya. Sarees swished, anklets chimed, and laughter came in bursts. Paper lanterns cast shadows on the pastel walls, and a long table was set up with sweets, chaat, and masala tea.

Diya walked in, holding a homemade diya platter. Sarika squealed, "You brought this?! You have to tell me how you made it." Diya blushed. "Pinterest inspiration."

She turned, and there stood Sona.

For a moment, they just looked at each other. Not as women peeking into each other's kitchens, but as women who had seen, silently and daily, each other's worlds unfold through a pane of glass.

"Hi," Diya smiled. "Hi," Sona said back. "You look beautiful."

"So do you. I love your saree."

They both laughed softly, the tension in the air dissolving.

Later, as samosas disappeared and stories poured like old wine, Sarika clapped her hands. "Let's go around and share one personal update. Happy or crazy or secret anything!"

Laughter. Groans. But women love stories, especially their own.

"I'll go first," Sarika said. "I started dance classes again! After twenty years." Cheers, everyone clapped.

"I've started painting," Rima, Sarika's sis-in-law, added. "And I am planning an art exhibition next year." More applause filled the room. In that room, all the women were uplifting each other like queens.

Aisha narrated her story of how she left the city for a small village. Everyone was inspired.

When it was Diya's turn, she held her cup of tea, voice calm but proud.

"I'm going back to work. I'll be joining as an HR manager next week."

Gasps. Smiles. A round of claps.

"I left five years ago to care for my mother... and then life took over. But I missed working. I missed myself." Sona was watching her, eyes slightly misty.

When the circle reached her, Sona stood up.

"I... resigned last week. After fourteen years in the corporate."

A collective gasp again, different this time, a few judging eyes.

“I’ve always wanted to write. It was something I kept aside, like a plate for later. But that ‘later’ never came. So now, I’m going to write. Books.”

Everyone clapped, but not everyone understood her decision.

Diya smiled at her. Their eyes locked again, not with judgment or longing but with recognition. Two women who had walked opposite paths, now quietly changing lanes.

As they were leaving, Sona caught up to Diya near the lift.

“You’ll be amazing,” she said quietly. “You already are,” Diya replied, just as softly. They stood in silence, just for a second. Then the lift doors opened, and life moved forward.

The night before joining her new job, Diya lay awake staring at the ceiling fan. It spun slowly, clicking every few rotations, like a ticking reminder of her self-doubt.

Her kurta, neatly ironed, hung from a hook near the cupboard. Her bag was packed. Even her shoes were polished and lined up beside the door. Yet, her stomach churned.

What if I’ve forgotten everything? What if I don’t fit in anymore?

Raunak stirred beside her. “You’re thinking too loud,” he mumbled. “I’m nervous,” she whispered. “You’re going to be amazing, Diya. You always were.” He affirmed.

“I’m not who I used to be.”

He turned toward her, brushing a lock of hair from her forehead. “You’re better now. Stronger. Smarter. Just

quieter about it.” She smiled, blinking back tears. “Promise me you’ll try not to mess up your tiffin tomorrow?” He laughed softly. “I’ve already YouTubed ‘how to pack round roti in a square box.’ I got this.”

The next morning, Diya dressed slowly, hands trembling as she pinned her dupatta. She walked into the kitchen to see Raunak pouring milk into their daughter’s cereal bowl, lopsided but sincere. “Good luck, Mumma!” her daughter said, throwing tiny arms around her waist.

Diya closed her eyes. This moment, this mess, this embrace was hers. And it gave her strength. She walked out the door, heels clicking with a rhythm she hadn’t heard in years.

Meanwhile, Sona sat in her study, staring at a blank Word document.

Chapter One. Nothing followed.

She had imagined this day so often, coffee in hand, fairy lights above her desk, words flowing like a river. Instead, her coffee had gone cold, and the only sound was the ceiling fan’s whirl. She sighed, pulling the blanket tighter. The silence she craved now felt too loud.

Just then, the bell rang. She opened the door to see a yellow lily bouquet lying on the doormat. A small note read: “*You’re officially a writer now. No meetings, just musings. Love, Yash.*” She smiled, clutching the flowers to her chest.

At dinner, she was chopping vegetables slowly, almost meditatively while Yash set the table.

“It’s weird,” she said. “I don’t know who I am without a calendar full of deadlines.”

Yash handed her a bowl of dal. "Then maybe this is your time to *become* who you are."

At her new office, Diya took a deep breath before entering the glass door. The receptionist smiled. Her ID card was ready. The cabin was modest. A pot of artificial succulents. A whiteboard. A window overlooking the city. The HR team welcomed her with warm handshakes and "So glad to have you back" smiles.

By afternoon, she was in her element fixing old systems, suggesting workflow hacks, remembering her knack for reading people. At lunch, she opened her tiffin to find a note from Raunak inside: "*Hope I packed your smile too. -R*"

She couldn't help but laugh softly, surrounded by the clink of spoons and hum of office gossip.

Back at home, Sona's phone blinked a photo from school where Amy came first in swimming, and she was carrying her olive-green tote: *Precious*. She wiped her small tear from the corner of her eye and finally began to type:

"My olive-green tote bag. The silent witness to my unfolding. If I were to recount the story of my life, it wouldn't be through the voices of people, but through the faded threads of that bag. It has been with me longer than most people have. It has seen versions of me no one else has: the traveler, the dreamer, the broken, the hopeful."

She wrote for hours, uninterrupted. The words tumbled out as if they were waiting for her all along. When Yash came home, she read him the first two pages. He looked at her like he did in their early days with admiration, not just affection. "You wrote this?" "I did." Sona smiled

"It's beautiful. I missed this version of you."

“So did I,” she whispered.

A few days later, at 7 PM sharp, Sona was in her kitchen again, this time, not rushing to leave or heating leftovers. She hummed an old tune as she stirred vegetables slowly, barefoot, in a dress. Yash walked in with flowers again, while lilies this time. “You’re spoiling me,” she said. “I’m making up for lost time. Once you are a successful writer, I will be at home, clicking photos and making food for you.” He said seriously. They both hugged.

A cool breeze drifted through the open kitchen window. The dusky light of early evening painted the sky in lavender and gold, as Diya set down her laptop bag and slipped off her heels with a sigh. Her kurta was slightly crumpled, and her kajal smudged from a long day, but her face radiated something she hadn’t carried in years, quiet purpose.

Raunak was already stirring a pan of tadka, wearing her old apron, the one with the faded floral print she had once used religiously. “Timing’s perfect,” he said, glancing up. “I came back early, so I made your favorite fried rice.”

She leaned against the doorframe, watching him with a smile. “You’re becoming dangerously competent.” He turned with a flourish. “Only took me a decade and a half.” Diya laughed. “We should frame that apron. It’s a relic of my kitchen reign.” He winked. “Madam, you’re still the queen. I’m just managing the empire.”

Few days later across the same corridor, in the adjacent flat. Sona leaned against the kitchen slab in a vibrant, feminine, floral dress, scribbling notes on a yellow post-it pad. The stove crackled quietly beside her, something simmering, something alive.

Yash walked in, holding two glasses of Red Wine. "Writing marathon over?" She took the glass and smiled. "For now. I wrote ten pages today. Some good, some garbage." "Even garbage smells like roses if you believe in it," he said.

"Poetic," she chuckled, clinking the glass. "Did I ever tell you... I don't miss my old job anymore." He nodded. "I know. You're home."

The scent of curry leaves and garlic drifted between kitchens, as both women on either side of the wall stood in their space, doing something they hadn't done in a while: slowing down and savoring the present.

Through the window, Diya saw Sona hair open, laughing at something Yash said. She looked at peace, her hands free of rush, her eyes bright.

And Sona glanced across to catch Diya dressed in workwear, still wearing her office lanyard, leaning in as her daughter talked about her school day, smiling with tired contentment.

They both paused. Their eyes met. Just for a second.

A silent smile passed between them a knowing, tender acknowledgment.

No envy. No comparison. Just the quiet understanding of women who had traded parts of themselves and found new versions instead.

A breeze swept through both kitchens, rustling papers, stirring aromas, fluttering post-it notes, and paper receipts alike.

Different paths. Different rhythms. Complete in their own ways. Not alike, yet not apart. Full in their becoming.

Ours, Somehow.