

The Chemistry of **REDEMPTION**

When loving you was not enough

Abhilasha Singh



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When...

Loving you was not enough!!

**"As I mustn't be alone without you in this
life....."**

A regular love story that oscillates between-

"The Rights and Not-So-Rights of the World"

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Return to the Middle World



We all live our lives in myth. We believe that whatever we do or have done has shaped our present and is also shaping our future. **We are humans, and humans are foolish** who would generally get too spineless when they would bow down in front of a statue less than one-fifth of their own size created by another man, and they would feel vulnerable in that state. But in the realm, we do not realise that what we were, what we have become today, or what we were ever going to be, is just written by the supreme power who exists beyond the periphery of existence.

As Laika divided the collective unconscious of all humanity into three parts, **the lower, middle, and upper worlds**. These places are not physical places that exist, but they are energetic domains that coexist. There is a renowned Jungian analyst “June Singer” who once wrote “The collective unconscious wonders that it is all there all the legend and the history of the human race with its unexorcised Demons and his gentle Saints, its mysteries and its wisdom all with each one of us a microorganism within the macrocosm, the exploration of this world is more challenging than the exploration of outer space”.

The world that we live in, we produce our generations and raise them, and we remain till we get back to the ashes from where we once came in the middle world. The

upper world is the invisible domain of our destiny and our spirit, and the lower world is the place where the record of all human histories is held in the realm of the soul.

Viren has always been a vivid reader, and Sushima was always away from books. She had always believed in living her life happily in her own cocoon, which only oscillated between the small titbits of normal human beings. The very first time they met for Viren it was like the channelisation of his energies into a better form and format. He recalled the time when he had read the pious “Shiva Purana” where the importance of the “Marriage Sanskar” of God Shiva is mentioned. Shiva Puran postulates that the formation of the famous creation of Hindu mythology, “**Shivalinga**,” explains the creation in bliss. It is the representation of the consummation of man and woman as one entity. Shiva’s Ling and Parvati’s Yoni mingled and intervened to transfer the energy of the universe to channelize the human spirit and body. But whenever he tried to explain this to Sushima, she laughed it out like a small dove chirping in her best tunes, and every time she replied that Hindus are so funny and yet one more time, Viren fell for her innocence and charm. How uncomplicated is the world of all those who know less, who **question less, and who accept more**. And how difficult it is for those who would want to know more than they already know.

Viren was constantly diving in the high seas of love “**helplessly and effortlessly**” whenever he saw Sushima. On the other side, Sushima was like Maa Parvati, who had

surrendered each molecule of existence in the synchronization of her amalgamation with her deity and love. It's an absolute bliss and rarest virtue of any relationship where you are willing to sacrifice your whims, and this is accommodative of the ideology of the other person. For Sushima, Viren was her own personal Wikipedia which doesn't even require a cloud to operate so she was like a 7 to 8 years old who always kept asking stupid questions and Viren was always that one teacher who had been blessed with patience as strong as the Himalayan snow who tries to explain the concept in the best possible yet Sushima would shamelessly announce that she hasn't understood and needs another explanation one more time in a different manner.

We all live our lives like a straight path, believing things would be like this, but the moment our line is smooth, God creates a trajectory, and suddenly things get into a different mode. The fact is that we are all like **this mosaic game** we used to play in childhood, where small parts are used to fit well, right to make the picture beautiful and wholesome. All those tiniest pieces look so weird and incomplete individually, yet when they were combined, that used to be the euphoria of the complete picture.

The people we meet daily, weekly, yearly are not a random recommendation algorithm of God; rather, these are the people who were always supposed to come into our lives. Some people are there as those big and easy pieces that we fit in first and easily, and a few are also those who come as lessons about our own selves and our vulnerability. However, even if it's harsh, the truth is that

we can't let these people be lost in transition. We have to keep even the tiniest part for the completion of our puzzle as even the minutest part if is missing wouldn't be able to complete the whole picture some people by default get together and start making our life a big fat picture but the funny thing here is we actually forget that we should soon find that one mosaic that would actually is most crucial to make our puzzle complete. That part of the puzzle may be the prettiest part of the puzzle, and we may get attached to that one person the most in our lives. However, this is the most important humane error that we make at this point, as we think that we have to restart the puzzle altogether, trying to fix that new piece along with trying to settle all other pieces so that we can remake our whole story. We have to remember that it's just one tile, even if we are spellbound by the beauty of it. We have to fill all mosaics in a way that all stay together.

We are not choosing anything in our lives; we are just mediators of what has been decided for our fates.

Unchosen, But Meant to Be



Viren rubbed his temples, staring at the complex set of data points on his screen. Another late evening at Neurogen Analytics, lost in the world of consumer behaviour patterns and predictive modelling through employing Neuromarketing. His research division, tucked away on the second floor of the towering corporate building, rarely saw much interaction with the upper floors. It was a quiet, almost secluded world of numbers, logic, and insight.

Yet, as he leaned back in his chair, stretching his sore muscles, his gaze wandered towards the large glass window beside him. The view overlooked the adjacent wing of the building, its glass facade reflecting the fading hues of sunset. His eyes traced the outlines of the floors above, moving idly until they stopped on the fourth floor.

A familiar nameplate glowed subtly near the glass railing: Human Resources Department. He rarely had reason to look up there. HR was a distant entity, surfacing only during appraisals, policy emails, or those mandatory training sessions no one wanted to attend. But today, his attention was drawn to something or rather, someone.

Ms. Sushima Banerjee.

She stood near the railing, deep in conversation with a colleague, her arms crossed in an effortless stance of

authority. The HR Manager. He had heard her name in office discussions before, but he had never paid much attention. Now, as he observed her from afar, something about her presence intrigued him.

Dressed in a crisp white blazer over a navy-blue blouse, she exuded confidence. Her expressions were animated, her hands moving subtly as she spoke. Even from this distance, there was a certain energy about her, self-assured yet approachable. Viren couldn't quite place it, but something was captivating about the way she carried herself.

A sudden laugh escaped her lips, light, genuine. It was the kind of laughter that cut through the monotony of corporate life, making everything feel a little less mechanical. Viren found himself wondering what kind of person she was beyond the emails and policies. Did she ever get tired of being the enforcer of company rules, or did she genuinely enjoy it?

His thoughts were interrupted as Sushima turned, her eyes briefly scanning the open workspace below. For a split second, Viren felt as if their gazes might have met. Or maybe it was just his imagination. Before he could process it, she disappeared into the HR cabin, leaving only the lingering aftereffect of that moment behind.

Viren blinked, exhaling sharply.

He had never cared about who worked on the fourth floor. But today, for the first time, he found himself considering it. And for reasons he couldn't yet understand, he knew this wouldn't be the last time he looked up.

Viren: Between Logic and Longing



The cold evening breeze swept across the ground as Viren stood near the goalpost, his sharp eyes fixed on the ball. He had been practicing alone for the past 1.5 hours, perfecting his shots with precision, each strike carrying the weight of a thousand unspoken thoughts.

To the world, he was a man of composure, intelligent beyond his years, rational to the core, but inside, inside this average body, he was a tempest, a whirlwind of emotions that he chose to keep locked away. There are things about him that he chose not to even discuss with himself, forget about telling the world. Absurd as it sounds, he is a mystery in himself that he never even attempts to solve intentionally.

The sound of footsteps interrupted his thoughts. He turned to see a group of teammates approaching, laughing, talking, carrying with them the exuberance of youth. Viren sighed. He was a team player on the field, but beyond it, he preferred solitude over noise. He believed people were disappointing, as most of the people lack conviction and transparency. With absolutely no desire to waste his time in mindless chatter, that too in hollow camaraderie, he picked up the ball and walked past them, his presence demanding respect without a word. He had no wealth, no lineage of power, but he carried himself with the confidence of a man who knew

his worth. Money never tempted him; power never swayed him. He had seen too many men crumble under the weight of their own greed. His family was humble, but that humility did not define him. He was his own man, shaped by intellect, fuelled by reason, detached from the noise of the world. He was always happy or sad in his own self, away from his own insecurities, drenched in his own achievements, and always up for setting targets for himself. He was aware of his shortcomings and was always prepared to work on them; however, at the same time, he was never sorry for his imperfections. On rare occasions, he had felt less; however, in absolutely no stances, he considered himself less competent.

Viren had always been different. His intelligence was not merely an academic excellence but a refined artistry. **As an MBA after a Physics major**, his mind was wired to decode the universe, to strip away illusions and find meaning in the abstract equations of existence. He saw beauty in the symmetry of Maxwell's equations, in the paradoxes of quantum mechanics, in the symmetry of the Laplace Equation. To him, reality was a puzzle waiting to be solved, not a mere stage for human folly. Yet, despite his love for logic and numbers, his heart was drawn to fiction, art, music, and beauty. As much as blackholes were full of mystery for him, so were the colours poured on canvas. He was not too good with painting or sketching; however, his idea and precision were almost invariably wandering through his own galaxy.

He could lose himself in stories, in the intricate weave of words that transcended time. He read voraciously classic

literature, modern masterpieces, philosophical prose, and even idiotic, hopeless romantic novels. His bookshelf was a paradox, holding Einstein's Relativity alongside Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, Godfather on one side and Igor Irodov on the other. He believed fiction was the only thing that came close to explaining human irrationality, the only space where emotions, which he usually dismissed, could be dissected and understood. He wrote as well elegantly, artistically, each sentence a careful construction, each metaphor deliberate. His choice of words was never ordinary; his prose held a rhythm, as if the words themselves were orchestrating a silent symphony. And he used to spend hours and days choosing the right words to fit into his thoughts in the most synchronised manner.

And yet, for all his artistic refinement, Viren was not one for sentimental indulgence. He questioned everything: authority, tradition, love, even his own emotions. He recalled asking himself daily about why he loved Ritu, and every night he used to find answers not to satisfy his whims or crotchets, but to stay rational about his ongoing (and not stale) affection towards the woman who rules his heart. He had no patience for mindless chatter or shallow interactions as his tolerance for stupidity was non-existent (not even sub-due zero). Most often, when he was surrounded by fools, he would just pretend to hear everything with a sweet 2-inch smile on his face while in his mind he was playing some random song to keep himself distracted.

He was, by principle, a feminist as he recognized the power of women, their intellect, and their strength. But in his own contradiction, he believed in male supremacy, in the structure where a man must lead, must hold ground. It was not about belittling women, but about the order of things as he saw them. A paradox, like everything else about him. Women often found him fascinating, drawn to his air of control, his effortless charm. But he kept them all at a distance, an invisible line they were never allowed to cross. He admired strong and mature women, those who carried responsibility with grace. But his admiration had limits. He kept them all at arm's length, playing by rules only he understood.

His thoughts drifted, as they often did, to Ritu. She was the only one who had ever truly mattered. She had understood his silences, had read between his carefully chosen words. She was the only person who could hear his glances, the way he used to smile seeing any random person. He never used to tell her that he was missing her because he was never distant in his thoughts or emotions from her. When she used to be around, it was a strange comfort, something u feel right after u sit on the bed of your home in your parents' place where you have spent your childhood. However, even when she was around him and he felt aroused by the smell of her skin or the titillating touch of her fingers on his hand (which was her favourite game to play, making random things on his hand through her fingers), the arousal never seemed to last a jiffy. He always wanted to caress her in the minutest detail, the way he used to hold his new books before the session used to begin. The way he keeps his brown diary

with so much love and affection close to his heart and doesn't share it with anyone. He was never like a usual man who would act bossy or control his woman and limit her in talking or meeting other men, however he would notice every gesture and movement of her while she used to talk to other men and notice in utmost detail if she is getting conscious the same ways she gets with him or she's flamboyant and bubbly with other men. His way of showing possessiveness was also very subtle; he would never say anything, but every time he would get jealous, he would try to do something that would bring her attention back towards him. On countless occasions, Ritu used to tell Viren what he was thinking while he gave her 5-6 stolen glances amidst a crowd of hundreds, and she wasn't wrong even once. It always was so simple with her. Like simply putting the formulae for finding roots in a quadratic equation and not worrying about factorisation and the noise of the environment. She was a treasure he had conquered, and then, she had left. Not because she wanted to, but because Viren himself dragged her out of his life, with absolute disgrace. And it doesn't really matter that he himself had let her go, but he had never let her fade. She still occupied the corners of his mind, lingering like an unsolved equation, an unfinished novel.

As he walked home, he got 5-6 calls from his mother, which he didn't receive. Viren knew that his parents had a fight in the morning, and he didn't want to talk to his mother, as he knew the mistake was not of her but of her husband. He started to feel angry towards his father. A man he respected yet refused to emulate. His father had

been a dominant force, a man who believed in control, who dictated the rhythm of their home. Viren had vowed never to be like him, not with a woman, not with anyone. He would never wield love as a weapon, never let authority become oppression. He would be strong but not overbearing. He would lead but never suppress. In the streetlights and a beautiful night, his mind switched back to physics. He thought of the double-slit experiment, of **Schrödinger's cat. Reality was nothing but perception.** And perhaps, just perhaps, **love was the same** existing in multiple states at once, both gone and present, **both real and an illusion.**

The city lights flickered as he neared his apartment. He enjoyed the night, the quiet, the absence of people trying too hard to impress, too hard to matter. In his solitude, he found clarity, a space free from mediocrity. Back in his apartment, he poured himself a drink and sat by the window, staring at the stars. Physics had taught him that time was relative, that the past was never truly past. He smiled slightly. Maybe that's why he still felt her presence, even in his solitude. There can never be any girl like Ritu ever who could make me hers without trying to make herself own me.

Tomorrow would be another day. Another equation to solve. Another page to read. Another moment where he would walk among people, knowing he was different. Knowing he was alone by choice. And yet there will be Ritu, a woman who still haunts him as she still controls his desires, and he still talks to her almost all the time without fail. He still imagines her eyes looking straight into his eyes without uttering a single word. He still can

feel her fragrance around like he used to feel after hugging her, and hugging her was his favourite, and he could have stayed patiently in her embrace the whole day But Viren being Viren, always used to hug her for 30 secs as he in his subconscious brain always wanted to feel this urge of hugging her and patting her back and feeling her skin near him again and again almost immediately after getting away from her. Restless, Viren was not; however, peace was far from him ever since Ritu wasn't there in his arms.

Sushima: The Mosaic's Softest Tile



The aroma of saffron and cardamom filled the small kitchen as Sushima stood near the stove, stirring a simmering pot of kheer. Cooking had always been her solace, her escape from the chaos of the world outside. While others lost themselves in books or music, she found comfort in the rhythm of chopping vegetables, in the gentle hiss of oil meeting the pan, in the methodical dance of spices blending.

She wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and checked her phone for another notification, another message she didn't care to open. Men, she thought, shaking her head. They were all the same. She had given enough chances, believed in love more times than she should have, only to be left with disappointment. It wasn't heartbreak that bothered her anymore; it was the sheer predictability of it all. She knew what they wanted before they even said it, and she had grown tired of playing along.

At 31, Sushima was settled in her career. She worked as an HR manager in a well-established IT firm, handling people, their problems, and their egos. She was good at it, not because she understood the intricacies of human behaviour, but because she had mastered the art of diplomacy. She values the opinion of all seniors and discards the opinion of all who are lower in the hierarchy. A simple and crisp way of dealing with people at work is

to follow their status, role, and position, nothing else. She was not an intellectual, and she knew it. Complex conversations about politics, philosophy, or science bored her. She found no joy in abstract debates or literary discussions. Books, to her, were a waste of time, stories written about people who never existed, problems that weren't real. Why read about life when you were already living it?

But Sushima was not a dull woman. She had her own passions, her own indulgences. She loved makeup, her collection of lipsticks and eyeshadow palettes rivalled those of professional artists. She loved dressing up, matching her earrings to her dresses, experimenting with new shades of lipstick, and feeling the confidence that came with perfectly done eyeliner. Her dresses were always up to the brimming shine of her cleavage, not showing much and still giving the hint of the fine line that demarks her beautiful assets. Though it wasn't about attracting attention, it was about feeling good in her own skin. She had always believed that a woman should take care of herself, not for a man, not for the world, but for her own self-respect.

Clothes were another one of her obsessions. From elegant chiffon sarees to stylish office formals, from floral summer dresses to cozy sweaters for winter, her wardrobe was a carefully curated collection of everything she loved. Shopping was therapeutic for her, a way to reward herself after a long week of work. She found joy in soft fabrics, in well-fitted blouses, in the way a beautiful dress could lift her mood instantly.

And then, there were flowers. Sushima adored flowers. Roses, orchids, and lilies filled her apartment with vases of fresh blooms, each corner of her home touched by the delicate beauty of nature. She had often wondered why flowers made her so happy. Maybe because they symbolized everything, she believed love should be pure, beautiful, fleeting.

But if there was one thing that truly made her heart soar, it was the rain. She could stand by her window for hours, watching raindrops race down the glass, feeling a strange sense of peace as the sky turned grey and the earth smelled fresh and new. Rain reminded her of childhood, of stolen moments of joy, of dancing barefoot in puddles before her mother could scold her. It reminded her of warmth, of chai and pakoras, of soft blankets and whispered conversations.

“Her mother”.

Sushima sighed and walked toward the balcony, letting the cool evening breeze touch her face. She had always had a complicated relationship with her Bengali parents. They were strict, traditional, opinionated and never quite understood her need for independence. Her father, a man of few words and strong principles, had always expected obedience. He had raised her with the belief that discipline was more important than dreams, that a well-behaved daughter was the pride of a household.

Her mother, softer yet equally firm, had tried to mould Sushima into the ideal woman, polite, graceful, devoted to family. Love, in their home, was never spoken; it was shown in gestures, in warm meals, in silent sacrifices. But

somewhere along the way, Sushima had grown tired of being what they wanted her to be. She had wanted freedom, choices, a life beyond their expectations.

And she had taken it. She had moved out when she completed 25, rented her own apartment, and built a life for herself. Her parents disapproved, but they never said it outright. Instead, there were constant reminders of how her cousins were settling down, how marriage was the goal, how a woman's life was incomplete without a man beside her.

But Sushima had learned the hard way that men were not the answer. She had loved and lost too many times, and now, she was done. It wasn't bitterness, it was realism. She had seen it too many times: men who started with poetry and ended with excuses, men who claimed to love but only desired, men who thought commitment was a game they could play and leave when bored.

She had tried to believe in love, in romance, in the promise of forever. And every time, reality had slapped her awake.

Maybe, she thought, as she watched the raindrops hit the pavement below, some women were meant to walk alone.

And maybe, just maybe, she was one of them.

When the leaves let go- thread of beginning buds up



From the beginning, Viren had trusted equations. Things moved in a certain way because of forces, mass, and vectors, all neatly put into sentences. After Ritu, life slipped out of its clean axioms and crumpled into anguish, teaching him that maths couldn't solve every problem. You had to be patient, rearrange the concepts obstinately, and devote attention to them.

His days were spent at a corner office of a respectable company, where the policies were respectfully enforced and the coffee was reliably bitter. His calendar was a sanctuary of rationality: meetings at ten, lunch at one, and replies **never before 4-5 hours to safely convey that he is a busy man and yet within the limit of twenty-four hours to keep the momentum** just going. Feelings, when they surfaced, were less audible, like a subsonic hum underneath the fluorescent light buzz. The frequency had been dulled and constant for months following the breakup. What everyone referred to as depression had subsided into a less raging pain now, a scar that showed him where the pain was still present but had healed at the borders.

Ever since, his eyes fell upon Sushima. The way she moved was unlike anything he had ever seen before. Her world revolved around flawless makeup applications

and amazing clothing that appeared to have been curated by an elite group of tastemakers; she was an HR manager with a Bengali accent and style. She was uninterested in reading, especially literature that Viren enjoyed, and she found humour in nonsensical topics. She sparked an emotion in him that could not be explained by a theory as she stood in the corner of a training room, her earrings reflecting the light from the projector. It was the first glimpse of wanting, and it was both simple and dreadful.

Almost absurdly named "**Happiness at Work**," the HR department has organized a weekend training session. Without giving it much thought, Viren signed up, seeing it as a chance to network. He took it as a coincidence in his heart. The two systems became compatible after he found out Sushima would be one of the resource persons. **He plotted his move. Quite diminutive. Everything about it was classic Viren: be polite, ask a thought-provoking question, and make a comment that hinted at depth without being pretentious. Pique curiosity. Take centre stage without being pompous.**

He carried out the strategy that day with a clinical serenity. He sat two rows back, made notes that would be used forever, and posed a question that was deceptively straightforward and well-considered. With a subtle change in her expression, Sushima acknowledged him as more than just a figure in the room, and she smiled, not the PR grin she usually uses for panels, but a softer kind.

As the session came to a close, the room became heavy with the last vestiges of the day's traffic and the metallic odour of vehicles. By the elevators, Viren noticed a figure

heading toward the parking lot; it was her. There was an excess of speed in his gait. Cars in straight rows breathed in the parking lot, which was a grid of concrete with fluorescent halos. Her head cocked at a text, she froze, keys in her hand.

Saying "Hi," he was almost irritatingly casual. "A parking lot? Why would you want to go for a stroll there?"

His eyes widened as Sushima cocked her head in enjoyment. "Pardon you?"

He suggested a more picturesque route. Nearby, you can find a park. **The Lodhi Garden.** Stay still. Traditional tree species. Is six in the morning tomorrow OK with you?

As if some part of her found the daring endearing, she commented, "Six is absurdly early." She had observed him, this man who seemed to schedule his emotions by asking about timing. Of course!

Like a brilliant, unlikely object, the absurdity remained buried under his ribs as he returned home.

The weather the following morning was mild and sunny. Settlers were preparing their wares, runners moved with breaths measured like metronomes, and the city retained the half-dream, half-aware quiet of the early hours on a Sunday morning. The planet was being nurtured back into existence. At precisely six minutes past the hour, Viren found himself rooted and naive as he stood at the stone entrance of Lodhi Garden. With her hair pulled back in a bun and a little rucksack draped over one shoulder, she arrived wearing a plain kurta. Her face became less of a painted picture and more of a real person

getting ready for the day as we got closer, and her makeup faded slightly around the borders.

As they strolled along the gravel path, their conversation drifted to seemingly insignificant topics, such as the nameless tree that perpetually lost more leaves than was necessary, the difference in scents in the garden during the monsoon and winter seasons, and a humorous anecdote from human resources regarding an employee who attempted to use his own birthday as a basis for a quarterly review.

In the vicinity of the main tomb, they discovered a peaceful flight of steps made of broad stone that carried a subtle aroma of long-gone rain and history. People moved at a leisurely pace, being kind and considerate; the environment here permitted little moments of quiet. Sitting with the composed composure he had developed over many years of exams and negotiations, Viren suddenly began to sing.

It was soft. A sweet, gentle, and familiar song had intruded on his lips without his knowledge or consent, and he sang its opening lines: **"Ye moh moh ke dhaage, teri ungliyon se ja uljhe..."** The notes were perfect for the morning; however, his voice was rough around the edges and better suited to presentations than melodies.

Suddenly, Sushima's laughing, which had before been an automatic, condescending sound, subsided. A surprising effect of the music was to warm the air between them. Like a shutter opening, her face transformed gently. Her countenance loosened as she embraced the lyric's promise of both intimacy and modesty.

Her hand extended. It started with an index finger, which was clumsy and unproven. Next, she placed Viren's little finger in her palm and slipped her smaller finger, the one she likely used to sign documents and pluck at lipstick, into his. A tiny crawl of sensation passed, in an unquantifiable manner, through his arm and landed in the hollow of his chest; the contact was both absurdly simple and enormously consequential. The reality seemed more like a soft admitting breath than electricity, which would have been too dramatic a word.

Their fingers intertwined in a tiny, unintentional geometry, and they remained that way. It was warmer than he had anticipated to feel Sushima's hand. There was an air of gentle wonder in her eyes as she stared at him, an emotion he was unable to decipher. Unexpectedly, his plan to act decently and reveal a part of himself that could interest her had been both fruitless and effective, and Viren had no idea why. **Instead of being observed in a way that made him seem fake, he was actually noticed in a way that made him seem noticed.**

Allowing the afternoon to act as if it were still morning, they relocated from the steps to the grass. The neighbouring tree let go of its leaves with the dignified apathy of ancient objects. Gradually, they descended and landed on Sushima's lap and shoulders like confetti for an intimate ritual, first a pale green and later an amber. As Viren looked down, she saw a leaf land on her hair and then another one on her kurta's hem. As a tiny, lovely breakdown of continuity, each leaf was both ridiculous and stunning. Uninvited as they had been before, he

began to see the leaves as a metaphor for his history unravelling, one thin, inevitable thread at a time.

While reclining on the grass, Viren allowed the sky to be plain, blue, and unfiltered. The subtle touch conveyed a profound message as Sushima's hand found rest in the bend of his arm. The weight of his history, the sorrow that had hitherto dictated his daily routine, seemed to be slipping away from him like a knot. Nothing happened to it. It was unnecessary. However, the sharp corners that had previously shredded him were now rounded off, and he could more easily navigate them.

When you sing, is it often? Looking at the branch lattice, Sushima asked with her head cocked back.

"Only when I lose all sense of reason," he remarked. "And on occasion, when the emotion is reawakened in me."

She grinned, the kind she would wear when taken aback rather than the stage-managed grin of a panellist. **"You seem to think in patterns when you sing."** The day passed quietly: a chuckle, a mutual quiet, a leaf poking its way into the tiny crevice behind his ear and standing out like a period. His goal in attending the program was to stand out. He departed from the park clutching a tiny hand, his throat resonating with a melody, and a clear feeling that the universe had rearranged itself along a different axis.

Viren glanced at Sushima and came up with equations that solved themselves as they went back toward the gate, with the city waking up all around them. Unlike many

men, he recorded in his journal certain little things: the way her grin looked in the morning light, **the feeling of her finger curled in his, and the way falling leaves could bring forth something new and complete.**

After Ritu, He finally felt like He could look forward to anything other than a blank page begging for an apology. There was an air of potential value in the page's blankness.

"Start anew?" Rather than asking her, he spoke to the air. Sushima squeezed his little finger, like an answer given and accepted.

"Yes," she said. "But earlier next time. Six is already my new late."

He laughed then, a short, honest laugh and they walked out of Lodhi Garden together, **two people whose equations had found a new variable and, in that addition, a plausible solution.** After reaching his flat, Viren took out his brown diary and wrote something after ages-

There is a void

Not the void through melancholy

However, a void

Which was non-existent

Before I knew that

She existed!!

She could be a simple human or more

Or could she be a **body in a soul?**

She could be a thought or more
Or could she be the bridge to my own?
She could be a fragrance I wear
Or could she be the smell of my loneliness that lingers?
She could be the air in which I breathe
Or could she be the energy universe release?
She could be the dreams I see in the night
Or could she be the answer to my prayers done right?
She could be the passion I crave in my art
Or could she herself be the illumination or the spark?
She could be the chaos I feel when long lines for meeting
me spill
Or could she be the tranquil peace?
I'm yet to decide what she could be.
May she be my own substance to fill my vacuum
Or the Void himself to which I succumb?

A Hand Extended, A Life Accepted: An unusual Proposal



Sometimes we move in cycles of life. We think we are trying to move ahead in life, but in reality, just moving across one pillar to another... one corner to another.... Life moves on, and we can't locate the centre of gravity for the very existence of our being... It was exactly like this for Sushima until she found Viren... it was the life she was living in her own monochrome ways... never had she met the fairy of happiness in the epitome, and ever she couldn't stick cupid to touch her heart!

Sushima was an ordinary gal, slightly overweight, seemingly sensible, self-proclaimed intelligent, constantly struggling to travel the distance from whitish to fair skin tone Fighting her own insecurities in her small, kind heart in this big, ferocious, cruel world.

Viren was also an ordinary guy with extraordinary conviction for his dreams and beliefs... Who was his own favourite superhero? It was his magnetic charm about life that used to attract people of all genres to him. He had small eyes with much bigger dreams and beautiful lips with a great smile.

When they met one day, it didn't rain, the piano wasn't played, and Arijit didn't sing in the background But both of them could guess there was something that

clicked for them!! As a wise man said, someday meeting somebody we know, we'll know why it didn't work with anyone else.

It was one fine afternoon when she was sitting in her office doing her work, he came and sat, and they started talking casually. It wasn't anything concrete they were really discussing, yet it seemed the most interesting conversation they ever had in their lives.... They were laughing and giggling over loads of illogical jokes and carefully noticing the movements of each other's lips... moments seemed too momentous and their eyes sparkling with desires and joy kept on shining.... He wanted to say something, she wanted to hear something yet he never said and she never heard. He was sipping more water than usual, and her heart was beating faster than ever It was silent. same silence that is more meaningful than serious conversations, suddenly Viren stood up and left Sushima wanted to hold his hand and ask him not to go. Viren wanted to just take Sushima's hand in his hands and tell her about those magical vibrations, which he was feeling stronger than even the highs of Weed...

Tring, Tring.. Sushima's phone vibrated. It was an indication of a new SMS, puzzled, she opened it, it was a text from an unknown number which read "**First Pink Page**", she got confused and looked here and there and found a multi-coloured pad lying on her Table which she used as a rough pad to write notes.... Curiosity reached its highest peak and she opened the first pink page, which

read “**I LOVE YOU**”! Sushima realized It was Viren’s number.

What a damn simple yet sweet way of expression, Sushima thought. She smiled ear to ear like a teenager and closed the pad to open it again and again at intervals of two minutes and kept on smiling in shyness Suddenly she picked up her most expensive pen and wrote “You are very sweet; I love you too”

She waited for Viren for a very long time, one whole day, which seemed like forever. The next day when she saw in his eyes, it was like we shot through a DSLR and the main object (**for her it was his eyes**) was in focus and the rest of everything was blurred. There was a strange comfort, shine, and love in his eyes as if he was halfway to Mountain Everest and his powers were all stored.

1. **Opening ball of the over:** He must have lied, she told herself, and just shrugged her head off. This one-foot distance of head and heart sometimes travels the longest distances in the world....
2. He must be a flirt, **Second Ball**.
3. Guys are like that, bloody opportunist, **Third Ball**
4. But he looks genuine, declared **no ball** by head.
5. This must be his favourite style to impress girls, **fourth ball**
6. His eyes look different, as if he is gazing into my heart straight. **Wide Ball** and the head gave an angry, red-eyed look to the heart.

7. Guys know what to say that impresses the girls most, **Fifth Ball**
8. I am not as dumb as he thinks, that I go weak and trust him, **Over Finished!**

Viren was standing well inside the crease, firm, unmoved, smiling on his convictions, looking straight in the eyes of Sushima, who had just now given a wonderful maiden over, yet she is the one who's feeling lost against Viren.

LOVE is LOVE! it is that hostel warden who never permits the head to enter the periphery of the heart as head and heart are two students of completely different zones and can't be intermingled ever!

Here they were standing side by side, "Sushima" and "Viren", two people who had been imagining themselves to be the hero and heroine of all great English hopelessly romantic movies and fairy tale love stories!!

Fragments Before the First Step



"A first date is like the first page of a book - full of potential, waiting to be explored."

And this is what Viren scribbled in his favourite brown diary on that chilly morning of December.

Viren was hopeful for the day to start today, more than the usual days when he gets up after snoozing off the alarm on his mobile a couple of times. There is a strange restlessness that surrounds us when we want something to happen in a particular way, which is often irrational because normally we must organize everything before that moment happens. However, in the case of any relationship to shape as per the desired outcomes, this rehearsal phenomenon doesn't shape optimally. Humans should give every ounce of energy a fair chance to react to them organically. This is the thumb rule that humans don't apply here, and this is how humans lose track.

Every relationship is way different from the others and hence is very special in its own special manner. Viren, why do you get too philosophical in almost all things that don't necessarily require the same manner of layering? He questioned his own conscience; not all things should be complex to be beautiful or meaningful. Almost as accurately as not all precious things are expensive. Oh,

expensive struck a chord. Shouldn't I buy something for Sushima? As I am sure "**girls like Sushima**" would like to be pampered on the dates they have with their choice of men.

"Girls like Sushima", Viren repeated the phrase once again and took a deep breath. He was more disgusted than happy with the way he spoke this sentence. I mean, it sounded quite mortifying. He's going on his first date and is looking forward to going on many with her, and after close to 3.5- 4 years of a breakup with Ritu, he liked one girl, and he's thinking so ignominiously.

He's not the type of men who type the same cringe shit copied from somewhere and send it to multiple women, nor is he the one who shares songs to any random women just to impress them. He's a guy who doesn't even masturbate imagining known women; he prefers fantasizing about unknown women or imaginary women. For someone like Viren, the togetherness has a dimension that exists in absolute surrender. **It's not only about the time spent in proximity, but it is always about the sense of togetherness, which is achievable only through the epitome of attachment. And an attachment of such sort can only be attained through the love which knows no boundary.**

Viren was not a pro when it came to dating in the last 27 years of his life; he had only 2.5 relationships. The first was when he was in school, and the girl was his neighbour, so her mother had asked Viren's mother to pick and drop both kids off at school, as her mother was working. That girl Shivi was a cutie in real, she had an

almost flat nose and a cute dimple, and she always used to smell so good. Though it is also true that girls generally smell good, even if it's a shampoo. The smell also reminded Viren of the perfume Sushima was wearing the other day. The smell was exotic, yet it was subtle, and Viren could feel the fragrance almost immediately as he was near her, and thinking of it, **he could still feel her smell almost as if she was standing next to him.** Shivi remained his partner in catching the school bus for 2-3 years, and all they ever did was just sit next to each other.

The second, **and the only real relationship** Viren had was with one of his college seniors who was in the third year while he was in his first. Viren was always the protected possession in this relationship; Ritu was always guiding him to steer his journey. Ritu and Viren were together for almost three years, and Viren was the one being pampered way more than any guy could have been in a relationship. I don't want to think about Ritu right now, as otherwise I will get buried under my depression and guilt one more time so heavily. He immediately and intentionally broke the chain of his thoughts for Ritu.

The remaining half of the relationship that Viren had doesn't even count because that was his absolute infatuation with his Maths professor during his graduation, who was extremely pretty, not in looks but in her approach. She was short, fat, and not so fair, yet it was something extraordinary about her smile and confidence that has always kept her way separated from the other hyped lot. Viren was always smitten by her grace and used to drool over her intelligence. Not only was she good

at Maths, but she was equally informed about current affairs, and she had a great sense of music. She could run a show quite literally and was a star amongst her students. And yet she was never seen giving too much attention to anyone. She was a fierce lioness; the kind of woman whose presence makes men uncomfortable and tremble in their knees. She always used to stand on the right of the blackboard cross-legged, and her presence was enough to illuminate the entire class. She was an epic example of how intelligence is contagious and how calculus and Boolean algebra can also be as interesting as the reproduction chapter in biology in class 9. Viren has spoken to her only three times in total. The first time Niti ma'am spoke to Viren was when Viren got hurt, and he was getting stitches in the medical room, and Ma'am was standing there to oversee the procedure. However, during the process, it was she who was panicking more than Viren. Viren was constantly consoling her that he was ok and it's not hurting this much, and she was getting nervous every time the needle pricked his leg. The second time Niti Ma'am spoke to Viren was when Viren scored three brilliant goals in the final football match at his college, and Ma'am was the continuous cheerleader for him throughout the match. The third and last time ever Viren spoke to Niti ma'am was on the scribble day at college and Viren asked her to write a message for him on his shirt and She wrote wish you good luck and then handed over her pen to Viren and said that - How I wish you used pen in college in the same way you used your legs for scoring the goals. Viren was extremely happy hearing this compliment while the entire class laughed at

him. As, however sarcastic it might have sounded to the entire class, Viren believed rock solid that Ma'am appraised him for his performance.

This is the beauty of love and the magic that is spilled only through the fact that love changes people. When you love someone, even the bitterest thing they say seems positive, and even a simple advice sounds like a controversy mixed with malign intentions coming from someone you don't love. This is a sheer truth, almost as basic as **"God is there to align the right people in your life at the right time and in absolute right proportions"**.

The beauty of love reminded Viren of the simple beauty of Sushima as one of those little timid creations of God who would always need someone to steer their life. For a rational guy like Viren Sushima's innocence was way too mysterious. Viren always liked women more intelligent than he, as he believed that the equilibrium is achieved to clear the gender parity. Sushima couldn't even name five fiction writers or five tennis players when they were kind of trying to chat about random things to bond better. Forget about players, she doesn't even know how many types of tournaments are played in world-class tennis. She doesn't know the Cabinet ministers, and last time she asked Viren if MLAs have bigger authority than MPs in India. When Viren asked her if she was single, she carelessly replied that **she didn't have the time or guts to fall in hopeless love**. He could not even imagine someone having less intelligence and guts and still managing to become the HR manager at such a young age. Age also reminded him that Sushima is 35, so it

would also be a problem for him to convince his family. Will see, it's just about dating right now.

And again, **his own sentence disgusted him**; it's just about dating right now. So, is he only looking for some situationship? Would Sushima take him seriously, or would he also be under benching like 2-3 more? Is he trying to breadcrumb her, or is he trying to be brave and fall in love? The worst part is that he plans to ghost her in the same way he was ghosted by several girls he met on Bumble; instead of talking about their fetishes, he began to discuss life and spirituality.

Way too much on my platter, just first see how the day is ahead. As it is, **"It's life, so it mustn't be fair to be life"**, as Niti mam often used to refer.

Mayday



Alarm Sound

Snoozed

Alarm Sound- After 5 Mins

Snoozed

Alarm Sound- Again After 5 Mins

Baffled, He turned the Alarm off. The phone got bumped on the side table a bit too hard. Shit, it seems I again broke my temper. Sudden jerk and eyes wide open, awfully disgusting as the one-day-old temper was showing a fine line from the corner again.

Morning shows the day Viren murmurs and gets up from the bed. Quickly, he tried to plan for the day. He has an important meeting to attend at 11 am, so he must get ready by 10 am, and to get ready till 10, he has 1 hour and 42 minutes. So much time on my hands, **I could have slept for at least half an hour more.** Viren got agitated. **Morning, one hour of sleep is almost equivalent to 4 hours of night sleep.** It's a strange habit of Viren to always associate numbers with otherwise abstract things. He was always fascinated by numbers and their association with general life. And while thinking about the number, he again calculated his reverse timing and realised that he had exactly 10 hours and 12 minutes to

meet Sushima. As she asked for coffee at 06:30 pm. Why is he never a LHS person, but? I mean, since forever, when Algebra used to give him questions of proving $LHS=RHS$, he never attempted to start from the left, but always attempted from the right.

Adding on to the trauma of thinking spirals with absolutely no patterns whatsoever, Viren recalled the last conversation on Thursday night with his friend. So, was Abhay, right?

About the hypothesis-

H: There is a difference in the size of the breasts of women?

And thinking of this from nowhere, Viren thought of Sushima and smiled. He was not aroused, but still he felt a sensation to imagine if he would get a chance to confirm this with Sushima. Like today evening, they were meeting, and if they got cosy, would he be able to touch? **OMG, Viren, you're such a pervert!** You are going on your first ever date and thinking this. Such a swine you are! And the **"bad hat guy"** appeared in the left corner almost immediately, so what's the harm in thinking this for the woman he has his heart for? After all the bad sexual connection impacts most of the relationships in the world, and a survey says that low frequency of sex deteriorates the intimacy among couples. So how would it feel to have Sushima touch him..... He was almost about to get into ecstasy and was prepared for some action to relieve himself, when suddenly his phone rang..... It was Sushima, Holy Fuck, how does she know? Viren suddenly couldn't decide if he had to pick

up the call or simply cut it because both decisions were complex and like a core buyer, he opted for dissonance-reducing and slated buying. And like a regular guy, he chose the easiest first to finish himself off ... the phone rang twice, and then a message popped up from Sushima- Today seems difficult. Papa is calling for a dinner plan with his friends' families. Viren immediately felt like he had chewed the Black Pepper put as spices in making his favourite Mushrooms. **Yuck, who puts black pepper in Mushrooms, and how can Sushima cancel their first-ever date?**

Viren got superbly disgusted and saw the time, in this **"almost closed to satisfaction yet ruined moment of happiness"**, he had lost 27 exact minutes. So, he got up from the bed and started to get ready. Let's discuss over a call around 12:00 PM, he replied to Sushima.

Viren got ready and left for work, as he had a very important review meeting scheduled at 11:00 AM. He reached the office and quickly ran through the paperwork needed for the meeting, and looked for the presentation his colleague had prepared so that he would be aware of the agenda. Suddenly his phone rang, he saw a call from his mother, yet chose to cut it and send a text I will call back Maa. The moment he put up the mobile on his desk, he got 3-4 notifications on his WhatsApp. Seems the whole of London Bridge is falling. He got irritated again and opened his WhatsApp. Those were texts of Sushima- the first text had one smiley, the second text had 2 smileys, the third text had three smileys, what a kid is this gal, have I made a wrong choice? Viren again got angry and scrolled down. **The next text was Let's Meet. Papa's**

dinner had been arranged. Suddenly, all the anger, irritation, and disgust of Viren disappeared, and like an idiot, he grinned. Ear-to-ear stupid smile which, when mixed with shyness, can be spotted by almost all, including those idiots in his office. One of his colleagues immediately commented- What happened, Viren? Seems something is cooking, ah?? Viren again got in the second plane of consciousness and again started to think about the morning thought..... but it was his team review meeting time, so immediately he made a move towards Sharma's office.

It was already over 2:00 pm when his meeting ended, and almost immediately, he grabbed his phone as he recalled that he had asked Sushima to talk around 12. But to his surprise, neither was there any call nor any message from Sushima, and suddenly he again got disappointed.

Isn't she excited to meet him?

Looks like she's already not happy with him.

Seems her father again insisted that she come for dinner. Is her father the kind of father who can't be pleased easily? Would Viren be able to convince her parents? Would they be able to cushion the ego of Viren's family, as he knows his father is an egoist, almost close to being a narcissist, poor Maa? Oh, Maa called up 4-5 times, immediately, he called up his mother, it was a usual call, "a typical mom's call". She kept on talking about random things, complained about his paternal aunt and her family, who are presently staying at his home. Asked twenty times if he's eating right and what he eats in the morning, Viren kept on answering like a good boy, except

the moment he lied about his breakfast, as till now he couldn't get a chance to eat, and he was famished. So, after the call, he immediately got up from his seat and was about to go to the canteen when his phone started to vibrate profusely again. Leave, I will check the messages after eating, only now, and he left for the canteen.

Dosa for me, ordered Viren, and looked around for a seat. That hottie from the brand department was sitting alone on the left. Viren thought of approaching, but the almost honest guy inside Viren, who was still hopeful for meeting Sushima, denied this proposal and sat there only on the front table where the HR people were sitting.

But why didn't she send any message? Women generally show attitude, it's their regular. So, he got relieved thinking it's the regular feature and doesn't require any special attention. Sometimes, some pauses are needed for the right story to begin. **Philosophy, as it seems, but we value things and people most till we don't get them, and the moment we conquer them all this becomes momentarily pleasures.**

Viren finished Dosa and went straight to his seat, and started to work. It takes exemplary capabilities to be so successful. Viren was promoted twice in the last two years, and this speaks for the humongous efforts he is putting into his work.

After completing work around 5 pm, he thought to call his maid for dinner and picked up his mobile. Damn, that's when he realised, he had two messages from Sushima. What a duffer he is that he ignored his mobile when he should have seen it the most!! Anyways, the first

message was sorry, and the second and last message simply read **Mayday!**

First-ever Coffee Date with Sushima also got cancelled.

Viren came back home, changed, ate, called his mother once again, and talked to her about almost the same things, food, home, papa, yet his mind was seemingly empty, imagining Sushima.

Viren, in his usual way, took out his diary and again started to write, as it was his only way of talking to himself and talking about his life almost simultaneously.

In the fast-paced world

Constant ache from running some marathons

Moments fade away promptly, often

Because none of the moments last!!

However,

Quite literally,

There was a moment slightly bright

Special and not lame

Something pure and benign

And something that seemed worth being a Frame!!

Did you notice in the same flash as mine

The way I curled up my first finger

And held yours softly in an absolute feminine

Two fingers inter-wined

And walking in an intention benign.
Before you noticed, I took off mine
Because, honey, I fear you might just not like
Prudent, you are for the **world to be raucous**
And lame I'm for those onlookers
However, Strong hearts are meek too
Something they say,
You think I'm stupid to feel it that way?
Enticing it might be in a way, but it went
Almost for an hour I felt in a strange sway!
A story that floats in the joyous sunlight
Shines that bright
I don't know what they call it
I call it
A tale of Handholding on that beautiful morning of
Lodhi Garden!

Smells Like First Feelings



Viren had faced many challenges in life, gruelling exams, high-pressure boardroom meetings, his failed two attempts in CAT, his breakup with Ritu (which was so throat-slitting that Viren was on anti-depressants for almost a year), and even his overprotective mother's scrutiny when he stayed out late. **But nothing, absolutely nothing, made his palms sweat and his heartbeat race like the idea of a first date with Sushima.**

He had been drawn to her since the first time they met. She had an effortless grace, a quiet strength beneath her laughter, and a way of looking at him that made him feel like he was the only man in the room. Tonight was important. Tonight, he wanted to make her feel just as special as she made him feel. Sushima was not intellectually stimulating; however, on the contrary, it was her absolute dumbness that was attractive to him. As weird as it might sound, Viren wanted to take her in his arms and feel like Captain America, who's on a mission to save planet earth, only to provide love and shelter to Sushima.

Dressed in a crisp navy-blue shirt, a light faded jeans, and beautiful Under Armour shoes, Viren checked his reflection in the rearview mirror of his car one last time before stepping out. The rooftop restaurant he had chosen was dimly lit, its fairy lights casting a golden glow over

the tables, with the city skyline stretching endlessly beyond the railing. The soft hum of romantic jazz music filled the air.

And then, he saw her.

Sushima sat at a corner table, her deep red dress hugging her form in all the right places. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders in soft waves, framing her face like poetry written in midnight ink. As she sipped her wine, her lips painted a shade darker than the dress, Viren felt a rush of nervous excitement flood his veins. "You're late," she teased, arching a perfectly shaped brow. "Fashionably," he countered, pulling out the chair for her.

Her laughter was like the first notes of a favourite song, soft, sweet, and impossible to ignore. The conversation flowed effortlessly between them. They spoke about Sushima's disinterest in books, about places she wanted to visit but didn't visit, as she didn't have a partner, her breakups, and childhood memories that made them laugh until their stomachs ached. Viren found himself studying every little detail of how she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear when she was deep in thought, how her fingers traced the rim of her glass absentmindedly, how her eyes sparkled under the candlelight. How was she sitting with her legs crossed, and how casually she was touching the hand or the legs of Viren, how was she smelling, and how smooth was the touch of her skin?

He wanted to touch her. Not in a hurried, desperate way, but in a way that said, **I see you. I want you.** I'll cherish you. He wanted to just take her hand in his hand and sit

while he caresses his fingers in a natural yet sensual way. He wanted to wrap his hand around her shoulder so that she could just lean on his hand, and he could smell her hair. But nothing of this sort happened till almost 11:30 at night, and the waiter came to inform that the restaurant is now about to close.

However, thankfully, the deepened night and the wine worked its magic; Sushima and Viren both were not ready to let go of each other. Sushima suddenly leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Want to come over and see my apartment?"

Viren nearly choked on his drink. He had expected to work up to this moment, maybe after a few more dates, after more lingering glances and stolen touches. But here she was, giving him an invitation wrapped in temptation.

He nodded. **"I'd love to."**

Her apartment smelled like lavender and warm vanilla, a scent that wrapped around him the moment he stepped inside. It was like Sushima was spread throughout the whole apartment. It's the Tommy perfume, you idiot Viren replied to himself after seeing the exquisite Tommy perfume almost thrown on her couch. Viren got angry with her carelessness, however, he got happy thinking maybe she was too excited for her date with him that she forgot to keep her things properly. The lights were low, the soft flickering glow of candles casting dancing shadows along the walls. Things were scattered across the coffee table, a half-finished glass of wine sat by the window, and a faint melody played in the background. The almost close to perfectionist Viren could have

otherwise been utterly disgusted with the littering all around; however, the high on love Viren found this all-chaos utmost soothing for now.

She kicked off her heels with a sigh of relief. "Make yourself comfortable," she murmured, disappearing into the bedroom. Viren ran a hand through his hair, exhaling slowly. He needed to play this cool. Be smooth, be charming.

When she emerged, she had changed into a loose satin robe, the delicate fabric sliding against her skin with every movement. She was a vision of effortless sensuality, and Viren felt his throat go dry.

She sat beside him on the couch, close enough that he could feel the warmth of her body. "You're nervous," she noted, her fingers grazing the back of his hand.

"A little," he admitted, chuckling. "You do that to me."

She tilted her head, studying him. "That's cute."

Her lips were on his before he could respond—soft, warm, and tasting of red wine. His hands instinctively found her waist, pulling her closer as the world outside faded away. Every brush of her lips against his sent a slow, burning heat curling through him.

He deepened the kiss, his fingers tracing the line of her spine through the silk of her robe. She sighed into him, her body moulding against his.

Then, in his eagerness to stand and lead her toward the bedroom, he somehow managed to step on the hem of her

robe, yanking it slightly and almost sending both tumbling to the floor.

Sushima let out a surprised squeal before bursting into laughter.

"Smooth, right?" he groaned, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You're adorable," she teased, pulling him toward the bedroom.

As they reached the bed, Viren attempted to untie the sash of her robe with what he imagined was a seductive touch. Instead, the knot stubbornly refused to budge. He tugged, twisted, and even tried to discreetly loosen it with his teeth.

"Need help?" she whispered against his ear.

"No, no. I've got this," he muttered, determined.

With one final pull, the sash finally came undone—except he lost his balance in the process, tumbling forward onto her in a graceless heap.

Sushima erupted into laughter, her head falling back against the pillows.

"This is not how I imagined this going," he groaned, burying his face in his hands.

She pulled him down beside her, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. "It's perfect," she whispered. "Because it's real."

Viren took a shaky breath, brushing his lips against the soft skin of her neck, inhaling her scent. He wanted to take his time, to explore every inch of her with reverence. But

as the moment built, as hands and lips tangled in urgency, his nerves and excitement seemed to work against him.

And then, just as everything was reaching its peak, his body betrayed him.

Silence.

Viren froze. His heart pounded in his chest as mortification sank in.

Sushima, ever so graceful, ran a soothing hand over his arm. "Hey," she murmured gently, her lips brushing against his temple.

"I—" He exhaled sharply. "I don't know what happened."

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "between the wine, the nerves, and your epic battle with my robe, I'd say your body is just... confused."

He groaned, rolling onto his back and covering his face.
"This is the worst."

Sushima curled up beside him, resting her head against his chest. "It's really not," she reassured him. "Honestly, I've had a lot of first times. Some were perfect, some were messy, but none of them were quite this fun."

He turned to look at her, searching her face for any trace of pity. But there was none. Only warmth. Only understanding.

"You're not just saying that to make me feel better?" he asked.

She smiled, pressing a kiss to his bare shoulder. "Nope. I kind of love that you're not perfect. Makes you even more irresistible."

He let out a breath, his tension finally easing. "I swear, next time, I'll be smooth and confident."

"Next time?" she teased, her fingers tracing circles on his chest.

"Oh, there will definitely be a next time," he smirked. "I have a redemption arc to fulfill."

She laughed, the sound wrapping around him like the coziest warmth.

And as they lay there, tangled together in soft sheets and quiet laughter, Viren realized something—maybe perfection wasn't the goal. Maybe the best moments were the ones where you stumbled, where you laughed, where you allowed yourself to be completely and utterly human.

And if that was the case, then tonight had been more than perfect.

Tonight had been real.

However, the manhood for Viren had just failed him so badly in front of Sushima. He just chuckled like a five-year-old got up the bed in his black underwear and excitedly said Sushima,

Five is always ahead. I might have been disastrous today and couldn't give you any happiness, and on the Likert scale you possibly would have rated me subdue zero, but I assure you that five is ahead. Just give me more chances.

Sushima smiled ear to ear like an elf and hugged him tight, pushing her bare assets a bit more firmly on his chest. **And they slept commando that night.**

Ritu: An Obsidian in the hands of an Oracle



Viren had never believed in love at first sight, but the first time he saw Ritu, something inside him shifted. It wasn't love—not yet—but it was an undeniable pull, a gravitational force that seemed to anchor him to her presence. Viren was always one guy who liked people with content, and that's why perhaps he was always attracted to women older than him. Girls of his age never really could attract him because they all looked so stupid, timid, and fragile to him.

Ritu was two years his senior at university, an Economics honours final year student who could make the guys turn on in seconds through her sharp eyes and lips and confidence in a way that made people stop and listen whenever she spoke. While Viren was still finding his footing in the chaotic whirlwind of college life, Ritu already owned every room she walked into. She was the kind of person who made late-night discussions about philosophy feel like poetry, who could dance barefoot on the grass at midnight without caring who was watching, and who never apologized for wanting more from life. She was a girl who could directly look into the eyes of any man, whoever, and make him fall for her for the content and the substance she carries with her out of grace.

Viren, fresh into his first year of BSc, had met her at a debating competition. He had been one of the youngest

participants, nervous but determined to prove himself. Ritu, on the other hand, was already a star of the university. She was an all-time winner, and her confidence was oblivious. She spoke with an effortless eloquence that left the audience spellbound. Viren had watched her, mesmerized, barely paying attention to his own preparation. He was not only lost in her **white transparent kurta and blue sports bra, inside which was clearly visible, but also noticed her nails painted blue, matching her blue watch and blue sneakers.** This gal got some style so crisp that Viren was aroused.

"You're staring," a voice had broken through his thoughts.

Viren turned, startled, to find her looking straight at him, a smirk playing on her lips.

"I.....I was just" he fumbled.

"Admiring my skills?" she teased, crossing her arms. "Or just too intimidated to focus?"

He chuckled, trying to mask his embarrassment. "Maybe a little of both."

Ritu laughed, a deep, rich sound that made his stomach flutter. "I like honesty," she said. "Good luck up there, kid."

Kid. That should have annoyed him, but instead, it intrigued him. He wanted to prove to her that he wasn't just some inexperienced junior, that he was someone worth remembering.

And he did.

That day, he held his own in the debate, arguing his points with passion and precision. He didn't win, but he had earned her attention.

After the event, as the participants were milling about, she walked over to him, a slow, deliberate smile spreading across her face. "You've got potential, Viren."

Hearing his name in her voice sent a jolt through him. "Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should," she said, tossing her hair back. "Come on. Let me buy you a coffee. You deserve it."

That coffee turned into a long conversation. They talked about books, politics, travel, and the future. Viren found himself completely drawn in by her, her confidence, her wit, the way she seemed to see the world in layers he hadn't yet discovered.

That night, as he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, he realized he was in trouble.

That night, Viren lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, but sleep refused to come. He played Jagjit Singh to soothe his mind; however, even if he made the best attempts, his mind was restless, replaying every moment from his evening with Ritu. The way she had leaned in over coffee, her voice teasing and laced with quiet amusement, the way her fingers had carelessly traced the rim of her cup, it had done something to him. **There was something magically intoxicating about her, beyond just her beauty. It was her mind, her confidence, the way she made him feel like he had to keep up, like he had to be more, think deeper, speak smarter.** It was arousing in a

way he hadn't expected. He felt he was totally a worthy guy when she was with him; it was a kind of charisma that she was spilling, which was making him certainly better than the lot.

His body was already reacting, heat pooling in his core as he exhaled shakily. He shut his eyes, allowing his mind to wander into the realm of fantasy. He imagined her sitting across from him, that smirk playing on her lips as she toyed with his words, making him flustered and eager to impress her. He imagined what it would be like if, instead of just conversation, she had leaned closer, her breath warm against his skin, her fingers brushing against his hand, deliberate.

A shiver ran down his spine as his hand slid beneath the waistband of his shorts, his touch tentative at first, but quickly giving in to the desire that had been simmering all evening. He exhaled sharply, his grip tightening as he let himself sink fully into the fantasy. In his mind, Ritu was right there, her voice a whisper in his ear, her hands ghosting over his skin, her presence consuming him completely.

He imagined her teasing him, drawing out his frustration the way she did in conversation, pushing him, making him **desperate to prove himself**. His strokes grew faster, the tension building, the need coiling inside him like a tight spring ready to snap. The thought of her so sharp, so confident, so utterly out of his reach only made it worse, made him ache for something he knew he couldn't have.

And then, with a strangled gasp, the tension broke. His body shuddered, pleasure washing over him in crashing waves, leaving him breathless and spent. He lay there for a moment, chest rising and falling, his mind still lingering in the afterglow of his thoughts about her.

As the haze of pleasure faded, he ran a hand through his hair, exhaling deeply. He knew this was foolish; whatever was happening between them, if anything, was fleeting. She was graduating soon. She was older, wiser, and probably saw him as nothing more than a promising junior, an amusing conversation partner.

And yet, despite everything, he knew one thing for certain.

Ritu had gotten under his skin in a way no one ever had before.

Chasing the Unattainable- Under the Spell



There is something special about girls who appreciate Art, and Ritu was an epic description of art herself. She could play almost all musical instruments, play volleyball and carrom, and was a heartthrob when it came to debating. She was a national-level debater. She could paint and sketch and was always enthusiastic about the extracurricular and co-curricular activities happening at the university level.

At first, Viren never knew much about the talent of Ritu, in fact, he was already so much attracted to her through her debating skills only. One day, Viren saw one of the **most erotic scenes of his life**. It had started as an accident. One evening, he had been wandering near the old music hall when he heard the unmistakable thump of a bass drum, followed by a crashing cymbal. Intrigued, he peeked in and saw Ritu behind the kit, surrounded by five other guys, all seniors, all lost in the energy of their jam session.

There was something about the way **Ritu played the drums** that made Viren forget everything else. She wasn't just keeping the beat, she was commanding it, controlling every pulse and rhythm with effortless precision. Seated behind the drum kit, sticks twirling between her fingers before each set, she looked like **she belonged there**, like

she was born to make music. She wasn't the type of drummer who simply kept time; she played with soul, her entire body moving with the beats she created. And Viren, spellbound, used to sit in the back of the rehearsal room, mesmerized by the way she lost herself in the music.

Viren had always appreciated music, but he had never seen anyone play like that. The sheer intensity of it, the raw, unfiltered passion in every movement, sent a shiver down his spine. **Ritu wasn't just another musician in the band; she was the heartbeat of it.**

That was the day he skipped his first Thermodynamics lecture.

And then it happened again. And again.

Soon, it became a habit he would slip into the music hall whenever he knew the band was practicing, wedging himself into a quiet corner where he could watch without being noticed. Or at least, that's what he thought.

One evening, after another skipped class, Viren was leaning against the doorframe, completely enthralled by Ritu's drumming. The band was deep into a cover of an old rock song, "**Summer of 69**", the kind that demanded intensity, and she was giving it everything she had.

Then, suddenly, she looked up.

Her eyes locked onto his, mid-beat, a smirk flickering across her lips. For a moment, Viren froze, caught in the act. But she didn't stop playing. If anything, she played harder, as if daring him to keep watching.

When the song ended, she set her drumsticks down and stood, stretching. She then casually took out a cigarette and lit it right there, inside that music room. Damn, this further had made Viren skip a beat inside his heart. And Ritu was looking like a diva, her lips curling when she was inhaling the smoke, and the way her eyes rolled while she exhaled.

"Physics, huh?" she said, walking over to him.

Viren blinked. "What?"

"You bunk your classes to watch us jam," she said, leaning against the doorway next to him, arms crossed.

"Physics, right?"

He felt his face heat up. "How do you know I bunk classes?"

Ritu rolled her eyes. "You think I don't notice you lurking in the corner like some music-obsessed ghost? I've seen you at least five times now."

Viren cleared his throat, trying to play it cool. "I... just like the music."

"Uh-huh." She raised an eyebrow. "And it has nothing to do with me being the only girl in a band of six guys?"

He swallowed. "I mean... that's interesting too."

She laughed, shaking her head. "At least you're honest. Come on, since you're already here, why don't you make yourself useful?"

Before he could ask what she meant, she grabbed his wrist and pulled him inside.

That was the start of everything.

From then on, Viren wasn't just an outsider watching from the shadows; he became part of their world. He helped carry equipment, tuned guitars, and even scribbled down impromptu lyrics when inspiration struck the band. But mostly, **he stayed for Ritu**. For being by her side and covering her up when she used to smoke! Viren was asthmatic, yet he loved how Ritu used to smoke and make the rings in the air.

There was an unspoken electricity between them. During practice, he would catch her glancing at him between drum fills, her smirk knowing, as if she enjoyed making him squirm. Sometimes, when the band took a break, she'd twirl a drumstick between her fingers and toss it at him just to see him fumble. "Catch, physics boy," she'd tease.

Viren, despite being hopelessly out of his element, found himself addicted to these moments. The way she challenged him, the way she seemed to enjoy his company, even if it was in a way that left him constantly flustered.

One evening, after an intense jamming session, Ritu collapsed onto the couch in the rehearsal room, sweat glistening on her forehead. The rest of the band had stepped out for chai, leaving just the two of them behind.

"Why don't you ever play?" she asked, looking at him.

Viren scoffed. "Because I have the musical talent of a potato."

She laughed. "Everyone can play something."

"Not me," he said.

She leaned forward, picking up her drumsticks. "Here, try this," she said, patting the seat next to her behind the drum kit.

Viren hesitated but sat down. She moved behind him, leaning in close, her arms reaching around to place the sticks in his hands.

"Hold them like this," she murmured, her breath warm against his neck.

His heart slammed against his ribs. He could feel her so close, the scent of sweat and perfume mingling in a way that was intoxicating.

She guided his hands, showing him how to strike the snare, the hi-hat, the bass pedal. His movements were clumsy, nowhere near as fluid as hers, but she didn't seem to mind.

"You're a natural," she teased, her lips dangerously close to his ear.

Viren turned his head slightly, and for a second, their faces were just inches apart. His breath hitched, his fingers tightening around the sticks. The air between them was charged, filled with something unspoken, something neither of them was ready to name.

Ritu was the first to break the moment. She pulled away, grabbing her water bottle as if nothing had happened. "Not bad, physics boy," she said with a grin. **"Maybe you're not just here for the music after all."**

Viren could only sit there, dazed, pulse racing.

She knew exactly what she was doing to him.

And the worst part?

He didn't mind one bit.

The relationship between Ritu and Viren didn't start immediately. For weeks, they played a careful game, long conversations after classes, stolen moments in the library, late-night texts filled with teasing and philosophy. Viren didn't dare confess how he felt, afraid that she saw him as nothing more than an amusing junior.

But one evening changed everything. It was the college festival, and the campus was alive with music, lights, and laughter. Viren had been dragged into a group of friends, half-listening to their conversation, when he spotted her. Ritu was standing under a canopy of fairy lights, laughing at something someone had said. She looked effortlessly beautiful in a simple blue Kurti, her hair pulled into a loose bun with strands escaping to frame her face. She caught his gaze and held it. A slow, knowing smile curved her lips.

Before he could overthink, she walked up to him. "Come with me," she said, grabbing his hand. Viren barely had time to react before she was leading him away from the crowd, towards the quieter part of the campus. They ended up near the old amphitheatre, where the music was just a distant hum. "Why do I feel like you're up to something?" he asked, his heart pounding. She turned to him, her expression unreadable. "Because I am." Before he could ask what she meant, she closed the distance between them. And then, just like that, she kissed him. A

long kiss that choked Viren almost with the intensity and hunger of swallowing. When they finally pulled apart, she looked at him with amusement. **"You're not so much of a kid now, are you?"** Viren grinned, breathless. **"Not even a little"**. And just like that, **they were something more.**

The Equations Between Us



It was one of those nights when time stretched itself lazily, and the world below seemed like a forgotten hum. The rooftop of the hostel, with cracked tiles, clotheslines, and a couple of rusting chairs, had always been their secret universe.

The sky was a black canvas scattered with stars, and the soft breeze carried the mingled scent of neem trees and late-night canteen fry. Ritu sat cross-legged, wearing one of Viren's old hoodies, her hair tied up in a messy bun. Viren lay flat on his back, arms behind his head, eyes scanning the stars with a philosopher's ease.

They had been talking for hours about old friendships, their professors' eccentricities, whether love was a choice or a happening, and why Maggi always tasted better after 1 a.m.

Then, suddenly, the tone of Viren's voice shifted. Quiet. Wondering. Like he'd reached a point he hadn't dared to voice before.

"You ever feel like... You and I were meant to be an equation that was waiting to be solved?" he said, still staring at the sky.

Ritu glanced sideways, curious. **"Are we doing math now?"**

He smiled, not looking at her. "Maybe. Maybe because logic is the only way I've ever tried to understand the madness, I feel around you."

She didn't interrupt. She knew him too well by now when Viren started stringing logic with emotion, something profound always followed.

"I've been thinking," he continued. "You know how in chemistry, valence theory explains how atoms form bonds? Atoms don't exist alone; they're always seeking balance, trying to fill their outermost shells. Like they're incomplete until they share electrons with another."

He finally sat up, turned toward her. "That's what you do to me, Ritu. **You don't complete me like in the movies; you balance me. You challenge me, unsettle me, but never break me. It's like... you're the one with the exact opposite gaps.** We stabilize each other."

Ritu stared at him, stunned. She wasn't used to metaphors that made her feel this exposed.

But he wasn't finished. "And then **there's Laplace,**" he added, eyes lighting up. "Laplace's equation it's used in physics and maths to understand how something behaves over space. In a way, it describes equilibrium. A state where everything balances out, where there's no sudden change or disturbance."

He took a deep breath. "**Our relationship, for all its intensity, gives me that feeling. Of reaching an emotional equilibrium. Of finding a space where my internal chaos doesn't spiral. You stir the storm in me,**

yes, but paradoxically, you also solve the equation that calms it."

Ritu's voice came softly. "So, you're saying I'm your... Laplace solution?"

Viren chuckled. **"You're the boundary condition that finally made the equation solvable. You're not just part of the formula; you're the reason the solution exists."**

The night deepened around them, the world below oblivious to the two souls entwined in words more than touch. For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

Ritu finally whispered, "And what if I mess up the equation one day? What if I disrupt the balance?"

Viren reached over and took her hand gently, firmly.

"Then we adjust. That's what bonded systems do. They adapt. **Real connections aren't static; they evolve.**"

A slow smile spread across her lips as she leaned her head on his shoulder. "You make science sound like poetry, Viren."

He looked down at her, the girl who had both disturbed and defined his world.

"Because when it's about you, even equations rhyme."

And beneath the infinite sky, in a forgotten corner of the world, two people began to understand that **sometimes love wasn't chaos or destiny, it was science.** It was structured. **It was the quiet, unshakable truth that when the right variables come together, the equation solves itself.**

Factory Reset: Status yet remained Unfinished



Loving Ritu was like being caught in a storm, thrilling, unpredictable, and impossible to control. She was his first real relationship, and everything with her felt intense to him. They stole kisses in empty classrooms, spent hours on the hostel rooftop talking about their dreams, and snuck away on weekend trips where the world felt like it belonged only to them. Kissing Ritu was never merely kissing; it was always like holding a fire in his arms, like usual girls, she was not only reciprocating if kissed, but she was also herself the initiator, and that was always a head turn-on for Viren.

Moreover, as she was the senior, the classmates of Viren were always so full of jealousy for Viren, and this was also the adrenaline pump for him. The most important trait of Ritu was her unpredictability, and that was something that Viren could never comprehend fully. She would fearlessly enter his classroom and request the Professor to release Viren on account of any random college activity, and then right outside the classroom, tell Viren that she wanted to kiss him so bad that she couldn't control. Someday, she would send a note through any random classmate of Viren, indicating that she's waiting for him.

She pushed him in ways he never expected. **"You're too cautious, Viren," she'd say, challenging him. "You**

always think too much before you act. Life isn't meant to be lived like that." And so, with her, he learned to let go. He learned how to dance in the rain without worrying about getting sick, how to take spontaneous road trips without planning every detail, and how to love without fear. How to sneak into the empty classrooms at night and romance. Their chemistry was undeniable. Their late-night study sessions often turned into stolen moments of passion, their whispered conversations turning into shared breaths in the dark. She made him feel alive.

She was a fireball and a soul that breathes in a body, a wanderer by nature and free from any fears. Yet she was always meticulously aware of her surroundings. She used to express her absurd desires also with utmost comfort. Shameless, she declared that she would make love in every nook and corner in the university, and she used to give spots as tasks to Viren to cover each week. What could be worse than her keeping him aroused throughout the days and nights to cover the spot she chose for the week? Someday, she would share her sensual pics with Viren during his lectures so that he would be forced to leave the lecture. Being with her was like always staying ready to face the high tides anytime without warning.

Sometimes she would set up a small bedsheet on the roof of the hostel at night and would dare Viren to climb up through the Pipe, and they both would just lie down under the open sky, seeing stars. One night, she rolled herself, leaning a bit towards the railing of the roof, and asked Viren

What if I die? What would you do?

Viren, being Viren, replied **What could I do?**

She asked again, so would you forget me?

Viren replied **Not till I get dementia.**

So, wouldn't you date someone else after me?

Viren said, I might not, what I have with you can never be with others.

Ritu said, taking a deep breath, What we have with someone is never similar to what we have with others, Viren. **Forget me when I'm gone, for the fact that no one lasts forever.** Viren got extremely upset with the way she said this and immediately got up and left the roof. The cracks were beginning to appear on the surface, and Viren was smart enough to understand everything before even the time, and much longer before he admitted it to himself. **Of all the fires they had, storms don't last forever.**

It was in the way she started cancelling plans, the way her laughter didn't reach her eyes like before. It was in the late replies, the vague excuses, the subtle distance that started creeping in between them. One evening, as they sat on the hostel rooftop, watching the sunset, he finally asked, "What's going on, Ritu?" She sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Viren... I graduate in a few months." "I know," he said softly. "But why does that feel like the end of something?" She didn't answer right away. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet. "Because it might be."

Viren felt his chest tighten. **"Are you saying you want to end this?"** Ritu turned to him, her eyes filled with

something he couldn't quite place: regret, maybe, or sadness. "I'm saying that we're in different places, Viren. You still have two years here. I'll be moving to another city, starting a new job. Long distance... It's not what I want." His hands clenched into fists. "And what about what I want?" She looked at him, her expression pained. **"I don't want to hurt you. But I don't want to lie to you either."** The words hung between them, heavy and irreversible.

They didn't break up that night. For weeks, they pretended nothing had changed, holding on to whatever they could. **But love, once cracked, doesn't hold the same way. The fights started. Small at first, then bigger.** The frustration, the helplessness, it all built up until one evening, after yet another argument about a future that neither of them could control, he simply said, "Ritu, we need to stop." She stared at him, waiting for him to take it back. But he didn't.

And mercilessly in front of her, he took out his phone and put it on factory settings mode without even giving a second thought. All the photographs, chats, calls, and everything were just erased in close to 7-10 mins.

Viren was standing there in full anger like Mount Merapi of Indonesia, a volcano in action, and there was Ritu, standing like a fool trying to comprehend what had happened right now and what would happen after this.

At first, the absence felt like a relief, a justified escape from the weight of unresolved emotions. But as time passed, a strange emptiness crept in. Ritu had graduated and vanished without a trace, leaving no way to

reconnect, no closure to grasp. The anger that once fuelled his decision faded, replaced by an unsettling void, an ache he couldn't undo. He withdrew from friends, skipped classes, and spent hours staring at his phone, hoping for a message that would never come. Sleep became elusive, and even when he did manage to rest, dreams of Ritu haunted him. The thought that she was gone, completely out of reach, made his existence feel meaningless.

He spiralled deeper into depression, losing interest in everything he once loved. At his lowest, the loneliness became unbearable, pushing him to the edge. In the weeks that followed the breakup, Viren sank into a deep depression. At first, he masked it well, telling himself he had done the right thing by cutting all ties with Ritu. But the silence grew unbearable. The realization that she was truly gone, out of reach, erased from his life, became suffocating. Regret gnawed at him, turning every memory into a haunting reminder of what he had lost. His world felt empty, meaningless, and one night, overwhelmed by loneliness and despair, he attempted to end his own life. But fate had other plans, whether it was a last-minute hesitation or a friend's unexpected call, something pulled him back.

As he lay staring at the ceiling, he realized that the pain, though unbearable, was not the end. It was a beginning one he would have to navigate, step by step, until he found a way to heal. However, as they say, Healing is a very slow process, especially in matters of the heart. **As many times as you may think of not thinking about that**

one person, so many times you would end up thinking about them.

Viren started to see a psychiatrist, and he was prescribed Antidepressants. Once a bright Viren who was living life one day at a time (as Ritu taught him to do), now he was living each day like a loathsome. On one of such depressed afternoons, Viren wrote –

Can someone please quantify LOVE!

How much love would be too much Love!

Can there be moments when presence is pressure

When affection seems more of a burden.

Can there be enough euphoria that

devotion may distort.

Like water to a Plant: essential, life-giving

Yet when the gardener gives too much water

instead of life he gives death.....

How much space is just adequate space

That you may breathe

And still may smell them.....

Like those pauses with notes

That makes the music feel Melody..

To love someone deeply is humane,

Yet one needs to learn

How to love wisely in this shallow world

Is love a worship or a work shift?

A cult, a shadow, or a shelter

OR All at Once, may be none at all....

How much love is too much love?

When love is filled in my heart up to the Brim!

Wouldn't I drown in the waters,

I once desired to swim!

RSVP to a Broken Heart



One lousy May afternoon, Viren got a text message that he was expecting a courier from Blue Dart. Weird it is, he thought, as letters and couriers are so out of bounds these days. He thought maybe his mother ordered something for him online and wants to make him better as he's been depressed for over two years now.

Viren was truly shattered after Ritu vanished without saying a word. Why didn't she fight with Viren? Why didn't she ever contact him (not even a drunk message)? **Why was he not even blocked on WhatsApp? He could always see her DP and her status; however, his messages were never read, and his calls were never answered.** Not even his **126 calls in one night**, how could someone be so heartless that **she is neither giving him closure by deleting him from her life, nor is she trying to let him plead sorry.**

Viren spiralled into depression, blaming himself for the harsh words that ended everything. He tried calling her from many new numbers; however, she never picked up any call. How is it possible that she ignores all unknown numbers? Is she not working anywhere? Anyone in this world picks up some unknown numbers at least sometimes. How is she behaving so heartlessly? Viren always knew that Ritu was doing it purposely. **It is her silent revenge, through the most brutal Chinese torture,**

the way he just in a moment erased all her memories from his mobile, she wants him to see her every day, and yet cannot reach her. Days turned into weeks, but Ritu never returned, leaving behind silence and heartbreak. Her absence haunted him; memories replayed endlessly, every corner of his life echoing with what once was. The guilt consumed him; he stopped meeting friends, lost interest in work, and withdrew into solitude. All he wanted was **a chance to say sorry, but she was gone, and so was hope.**

Viren opened his apartment, and there was a packet on his door; it felt like some kind of Invitation Card. Curious Viren opened the white and blue polythene. Yes, it was an invitation card, which arrived in a gold-embossed envelope, its weight pressing against Viren's palm like a stone. He read the name on the front again and again, like **a thousand times over**, as if his mind was playing tricks on him.

"Ritu Sharma weds MLA Sandeep Rathore."

His throat felt dry. He felt nauseous.

For 2 years, 2 months, 11 days, 17 hours, she had been nothing more than a ghost who could always be felt even when she was silent, unreachable, a void that had swallowed all the warmth she once held for him. And now, out of nowhere, an invitation? Not just an announcement, but a deliberate, personal gesture.

She wanted him to see this.

Viren clenched his jaw. He could ignore it. Burn it. Throw it into the gutter and pretend he never saw it. But a part

of him, petty, wounded, and still foolishly tethered to her, refused to let it go. **If she wanted to prove something, he would show her that he didn't care.**

And so, he went. He opened the Card. The wedding was scheduled at Patna Club, Patna. Viren always knew that Ritu was from Bihar, but he never knew what exactly her hometown was. He never asked, she never told. Having Ritu in his present was so important and enough that Viren never needed to enquire about her past, her family, or her friends. In 3 years of their relationship, Viren didn't have even 3 numbers related to Ritu (Family or friends). It was that simple for Viren that only **Ritu was the focus, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.** He didn't ever think that in case of an emergency, he must have some number for Ritu because the small brain of Viren only knew that in case of an emergency with **HIS Ritu**, he would always be around her.

29/06/2020- The Wedding

The venue was nothing short of grandeur, a five-star hotel draped in lilies, orchids, marigolds, and shimmering fairy lights. Political figures, industrialists, and well-dressed elite guests filled the space. There was no trace of the carefree, artistic world Ritu had once loved. The impromptu poetry nights, jamming with her band, sleeping alone on the roof of the hostel under those stars(she was caught many times by her warden), those serious fights over random discussions, book reading sessions with Viren in parks, those bus rides where they would observe people and make fun of random things, the quiet coffee shops where Ritu would just hold Viren's

hand like a small baby and Viren would enjoy the spark in her touch, those fierce discussions about capitalism and human emotions where if Ritu used to lose to Viren she used to get real angry and her pretty nose used to turn red and ears red hot, those sharp stolen gazes in between college functions where she was the organising member mostly and used to toss up to her juniors and sometimes wink to Viren seductively to embarrass him, those times when she used to make Viren her model and would sketch him, paint him or click his pictures and Viren embarrassed already as hell would try to handle the paparazzi.

All these scenes just came in front of the eyes of Viren almost immediately in the absolute sequence. How could a girl like Ritu would settle into something like this so lame, she was always against nepotism, she didn't even take up the role of president in any club she headed for years as she used to say that as a president she would get bound to speak what her professors would want her to speak and she can't trade her voice, her opinion for anything under the sky. How could someone like her develop a liking for such a facade?

Viren stood in a corner, scotch in hand, watching the spectacle unfold. He was a stranger here. This was not her world. **This could not be Ritu's world.**

And then, he saw her.

Dressed in a deep crimson lehenga, embroidered with gold so fine it shimmered under the chandelier lights, Red Dupatta was finely tucked with the Mogra and Roses in her hair with the artificial hair bun, the heavy Nath

adorning her nose, the pink, red, golden, and green bangles encircling her wrists, each ornament screamed tradition, commitment, and belonging. But she always wanted to wear Chooda, the bangles Punjabis wear in their weddings. She wanted to wear a blue lehenga for her wedding, and she always said that she wouldn't wear the Nath as she never liked her nose piercing. She used to say that she wouldn't do much makeup, and she wouldn't put on artificial hair. What a damn shame on Ritu, she isn't even following one thing she wanted to follow in her wedding. Is she forced to marry this idiot MLA under some pressure? A sudden rage of anger had run through the spine of Viren to feel that **his Ritu** is being victimised.

For the first time since he had met her, Ritu looked like she belonged to someone else. In fact, to make the matter worse, she looked like **she was not herself; she was someone else.**

His fingers tightened around the glass. This was the same Ritu who once scoffed at the idea of arranged marriages, who had once told him she would rather die than be known as someone's wife. **"What kind of life is that Viren? Shaking hands, smiling at cameras, living in a golden cage?"**

But here she was, caged in gold, laughing softly at something her groom whispered in her ear. Viren saw this scene in slow motion, how that man's lips approached the ear of Ritu, how the tip of his nose touched the dupatta of Ritu, and hearing whatever he said, how Ritu smiled, ear to ear, with a hint of shyness, making her pink blush even more pink. He could have

also smelled the favourite perfume of Ritu, Ralph Lauren. The same perfume that used to linger in the pillow and bedsheet of Viren's PG, much after she was gone, and the **same perfume that Viren could smell from almost everything that came from Ritu.** Strangely enough, Viren immediately felt the smell of that perfume right in his senses. And suddenly Viren saw Ritu whispering to this man holding his arm and leaning on his shoulder, Viren felt like the walls were closing in. even if she is getting married to him what is the need of touching him right now in front of Viren and these 200 + people, what does she want to tell the world that after some hours they will have sex? yuck, Viren got disgusted with the thought.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to shake her, demand answers, ask her if any of it was real. **Was this her choice? Had she truly changed? Or was this her way of proving a point? Was she just taking revenge on Viren?**

Their eyes met.

For a fraction of a second, Ritu's gaze held something recognition, nostalgia, maybe even regret. But then, just as quickly, it was gone. She tilted her chin up ever so slightly, giving him the faintest, knowing smile. It was the same old smile of Ritu, every time when she had outsmarted him in debates, when she had something which Viren couldn't do, she wasn't saying aloud but it was the smile that in one microsecond made Viren feel like a loser. **It was the smile every time she gave when she was right, and she had won, and Viren had lost.**

Viren turned away before she could see the storm in his eyes.

The music, the chatter, the flashing cameras, it all became a blur as he walked out, past the glittering decorations, past the echo of laughter, past the life that could have been his.

Outside, under the quiet night sky, he exhaled shakily.

For the last two years, he had thought she had left him behind.

Now, he realized she had made sure he **never** would. **This bridal look of Ritu is not going anywhere outside his memory span now.** And Ritu wanted him to come and personally look at her, I mean, how brutal it sounds. Viren will now spend hours and days and weeks and months and maybe years thinking about how she was looking and how she would look with her wedded husband. How would he hold her hands? Would he hug her as close as Viren used to do? Every time Viren was in her embrace, Viren would try to smell her, and she would comment Are u a sniffer dog? Would he also notice the smallest move of her while they made love? Would they make love? like the love making Viren and Ritu had, those slow, sensual, each vein pumping blood kind of lovemaking, would she herself take the lead with him also, like she used to take with Viren, or would she be a good girl opening legs in missionary for her husband and have sex to produce their kids?? Would Ritu have a kid who is not of Viren? Viren always wanted to have many kids. He always believed that the moral obligation of getting married is to produce kids... so like at max after a year, Ritu would become a mother... and Viren was already sure of Ritu, in his opinion, Ritu would be a

terrific mother, the mother who is admired by even the friends.... Can she just have a child with Viren and then marry this fucker? Viren was surely not in his senses; he was thinking all this, and still he was there, like right there at the venue where she was getting married to someone else, in front of his own eyes.

Viren stood at the edge of the wedding venue, his heart in ruins. The decorations, the music, and the chatter all faded into a blur as reality hit him. Ritu was gone, and the weight of it crushed him. Without a word to anyone, he turned and walked away, each step heavy with disbelief and sorrow. He walked aimlessly, **covering 12.7 kilometres, lost in a storm of regret and heartbreak.** When his strength finally gave out, he collapsed onto the side of a deserted road. There, under the open sky, he broke down completely, tears pouring, heart aching, mourning a love he couldn't hold onto.

And to make the matter worse, He always knew.....

It was always his Fault!

Does the Mirror ever Lie?



The morning sun filtered through the embroidered curtains of the ministerial bungalow, casting golden patterns on the marble floor. From the outside, the house looked like a monument to success, elegant, imposing, guarded. But inside, Ritu moved like a shadow. Quiet. Cautious. Invisible even to herself.

Her husband, Sandeep Rathore, the youngest MLA in the ruling party, had risen swiftly through the ranks with charisma and calculation. He was the kind of man who could smile at a crowd and strangle a sentence at home. He was handsome, attractive, and always well-dressed. Everyone saw his charm, but only she knew his cruelty.

The mirror in the bridal suite was too large, too cruel. It did not flatter or soften. It reflected only truth, a truth Ritu had tried to ignore behind layers of turmeric, silk, and rituals. Now, with the ceremonial vermilion still fresh in her parting, she stood staring at a stranger. The stranger was no one else but herself.

Is this helpless creature with bruises on her face and arm really Ritu?

Sandeep had always been a man of power, but in marriage, his dominance mutated into control. The promises he'd made when they were young, as Ritu and his family were friends for many generations, when love

was naive and rebellions were sweet, as the actions were limited to avoiding dinner or just bunking class and going for a movie. A political marriage whispered the gossiping aides to the whims of a man who always got what he wanted, murmured the party workers.

Ritu had been told many things about marriage. That it was sacred. That it was a union of two souls. That it would bring safety, companionship, friendship, even love. But no one ever told her what it would feel like to be caged in it, not just legally, but bodily. The wedding was a blur. Guests, flashbulbs, chants. Her face had smiled through it all, painted in crimson and gold, while her heart thudded with dread. She had once liked Sandeep. Or at least, the version of him that had promised her the world under a starry sky, when she returned home after facing a brutal breakup with Viren that had left her scarred. But that man who promised her comfort was replaced by someone who now wore political power like armour to get his way. On the wedding night, as guests still lingered and drums still echoed faintly in the corridors, Ritu was pulled into a silence she hadn't prepared for. The bridal suite was cold. Not because of the air conditioning, but because of how empty it felt of care.

Sandeep didn't speak much. He poured himself a few drinks, turned on music she didn't recognize, and looked at her not as a partner, but as a possession. She tried to make small talk, to soften the mood, but he wasn't interested. And when he finally approached her, there was no tenderness. No pause. No listening. Her

objections, spoken quietly at first, then more urgently, were ignored. Her body was not his home; it was his territory. And he claimed it. When it was over, Ritu curled up on the far end of the bed, her bridal lehenga strewn on the floor like shed armour. Her tears had dried into salt on her cheeks. She didn't scream. She couldn't. Something inside her had gone still. Broken, but quiet.

That night, she learned the most terrible truth: that in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of society, this pain did not exist. That which happened to her in that room wouldn't be called violence. It would be called duty. But inside, she knew better. And in the darkness, she whispered to herself, "This is not love. This is not marriage. This is not what I was born for."

They went to Paris for their honeymoon, which was not a celebration, but a siege. Every smile she forced for cameras was paid for in private humiliation. Every night, Sandeep would remind her not with love, but with violence, that she belonged to him. He called it his right. She called it something she couldn't bear to name. Ritu stopped flinching. That, she realized, scared her the most. Not the bruises, not the insults, not the cruel possessiveness. But how numb she was becoming. How pain had started to feel like background noise. She wore her bruises under long sleeves and silence. At parties, she played the smiling wife, the ideal consort of a powerful man. She felt like a puppet trapped behind a mask. Her body was a battleground, her voice a locked drawer.

But one night after yet another assault cloaked in the word "marriage," she sat by the window of their luxurious hotel suite and did something she hadn't done in months.

She wrote.

Just a few lines. Jagged, trembling letters on hotel stationery. Not a journal, not a complaint. Just a message to herself:

"I am still here. I still see. I still feel. And I will not be broken completely."

The paper trembled in her hand, soaked with quiet tears. The act of writing so small, so simple, became her resistance. That night, she didn't sleep. But for the first time in months, she felt awake.

A few slaps and kicks on the honeymoon were dismissed as drunken heat. Those forced nights in the bed, excused as marital right. A frightening, tightened grip in public, justified as jealousy. And Ritu had protested a few times. "You're my wife, Ritu," he had snapped, pushing her against the wall, anger flashing in his eyes like a blade. "Don't talk like a whore who's been wronged. You belong to me now. I have every right."

Every right. That word echoed through her bones more than the bruises did. Ritu waited patiently for this honeymoon to end. And the very morning, Ritu returned to Delhi, as soon as Sandeep left for his usual vagabond adventures, she thought about going to the police. But the laws she had read, line by line, left her cold. Marital rape was not a crime in the eyes of Indian law. If she were legally his wife and above 18, what he did to her body

was not considered rape. Not abuse. Just marriage. She remembered sitting in the corner of the bathroom, reading the section of the law on her phone, her hands trembling.

“Exception 2 to Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code: Sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not rape.”

Not rape.

It was like reading her erasure in ink.

She approached a female officer once, anonymously, during an event on women’s safety. The officer had lowered her voice and said gently, “Madam, I sympathize. But unless he beats you badly or there’s proof of public cruelty, there’s little the law can do. Unless... you want to file for divorce.”

Divorce. That word, too, was a luxury. Sandeep would destroy her. Her family would disown her. The media would reduce her to headlines. And she had no income, no real autonomy. She had given up her job at his insistence. So, Ritu did what many women in her place did: she endured. Not because she was weak, but because she was cornered. Each night, she lay beside a man who claimed her like land, marked her like property, and hurt her like a habit. Each morning, she wore sarees with long-sleeved blouses, long enough to cover her bruises and silence deep enough to drown her screams.

There was absolutely no day or night when Ritu didn’t miss Viren. She in fact, cursed Viren every day for being responsible for her condition. If only he had not left her like an orphan one fine day, she wouldn’t have to tolerate all that she’s going through.

Mountains would strip you Bare!



They called it a break. A mountain getaway, a trek to untouched hills far from media, politics, or reality. Sandeep, always conscious of appearances, had arranged it with two other couples from his inner circle. Their public image was one of power, glamor, and friendship. Ritu, the dutiful political spouse, smiled for the photos and packed her hiking boots.

But mountains don't lie. They strip you bare.

From the first day, the altitude made breathing hard. But not as hard as pretending. Sandeep's temper had been simmering for days, ever since Ritu had spoken out of turn during a dinner back home, suggesting something about women's education policy. He hadn't forgiven her.

On the second night, after a long and punishing trek to a remote campsite, Sandeep lost control. Maybe it was the whiskey. Maybe it was the thin air. Maybe it was the fact that no one could hear her scream. The others were in their tents. It was just the two of them near the fire, under the silent sky.

A comment. A question. Something small that's all it took.

His hand struck her with such force that she stumbled against a rock. The sharp pain in her shoulder was immediate. She cried out not in defiance, but in instinct.

Sandeep didn't stop.

He dragged her into the tent, furious and unhinged, ignoring her pleas and her injury. What followed wasn't an act of passion. It was an act of punishment. **He raped her!**

She lay still afterward, staring at the fabric of the tent above her dotted with holes of starlight. Her body trembled from the cold and the pain, but mostly from the betrayal. Her shoulder throbbed; she couldn't move it. Her voice felt stuck somewhere deep inside.

The next morning, she woke alone. Sandeep had gone for breakfast with the others. When she limped out of the tent, the world was radiant birdsong, mist, and laughter from another couple.

No one noticed her wince. No one asked.

Later that week, a doctor confirmed a hairline fracture in her shoulder. She told them she slipped on the trek.

But the truth lived in her bones now.

In a different metaverse, Viren was on the way to Sushima's home for the most-awaited date he was looking forward to. Especially after the disastrous first performance of Viren in front of Sushima, last Wednesday.

A Second Chance



Viren stood outside Sushima's apartment, his fingers tightening around the orchid bouquet he almost didn't bring. He'd debated it all evening, too cheesy. Too soon? But something about the way their first date ended lingered with him. Not just the embarrassment, but her silence. The softness in her eyes that hadn't judged, even when he had judged himself.

The door opened before he knocked.

Sushima stood barefoot, in an oversized sweatshirt, her hair tucked messily behind one ear. She gave him a small smile, half surprise, half warmth. "You came."

"I said I would," he said, holding up the flowers like a peace offering.

She took them with a gentle nod and stepped aside. "You didn't have to."

"I wanted to." He paused. "I owe you an apology."

She placed the flowers in a tall glass, poured water slowly, then turned. "You owe yourself one more than me."

That stung a little not because it was harsh, but because it was true.

The evening unfolded without ceremony. A quiet meal. Shared music. Stories from college. The tension was there under the surface, but it no longer hovered like a threat. It breathed alongside them.

By the time they sat on the couch, close enough for their knees to brush, Viren felt his own heart racing. But it wasn't panic this time. It was something heavier, a mix of desire and fear, not of failing, but of being seen. "I kept thinking about that night," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "About how much I wanted it to be perfect. About how much I... froze."

"You don't have to explain," she said, her fingers brushing his. "You're not the only one who's been afraid of their own body." He looked at her, who was not really looking good at that moment, in a very stupid mini mouse oversized t-shirt and no makeup look, which was making her look more pale than usual. And it was not just her beauty, but he was still thinking about her stillness. At her patience. At the strange safety he felt with her, perhaps **as he knows she is silly, and hence he is the intelligent one.**

When he kissed her, it wasn't rushed. There was no urgency to prove, no desperation to succeed. Just skin, and warmth, and time like they were rewriting what intimacy meant, on their own terms. What happened between them that night wasn't perfect, and that was the point. It was real, messy, tender, slow. They laughed when he knocked over the wine glass. She teased him when his hands shook a little. He held her like she was both fragile and fierce.

And when they lay together afterward, quiet, heartbeats steady, Viren felt something he hadn't in years: **Enough.**

The morning came quietly.

A pale shaft of light filtered through Sushima's curtains, tracing soft lines on the crumpled sheet where Viren lay, half-awake, watching her breathe. Her back was turned to him, but her presence filled the room in the way the air felt warmer, slower, less afraid. For the first time in a long while, he didn't feel the weight of performance not as a man, not as someone who had stumbled before. There was no voice mocking him, no shame crouching at the edge of the bed. **Just stillness.**

She stirred slightly. "You're watching me."

He smiled. "Maybe."

She turned to face him, eyes still fogged with sleep, a smirk playing on her lips. "You talk in your sleep."

"Oh god," he groaned. "What did I say?"

"Something about lost shoes... and how Parliament should ban coriander."

Viren laughed a full, genuine laugh that felt like it scraped away some of the old layers of self-consciousness. "Sounds about right."

They lay there for a while, no need to fill the space with words. His arm found her shoulder, careful and light, like it was asking permission every inch of the way. She didn't pull away.

"You know," she said after a beat, "what happened last night wasn't about sex."

He nodded. "I know."

"It was about being okay with... broken things. In both of us."

Viren exhaled slowly. There it was the truth he had been circling all night. He hadn't just come to her home to fix what went wrong physically. He came to confront the expectations he had buried himself under. The myths. Masculinity is tied to performance. The fear of not being enough. "I spent years trying my worth to what I could prove," he said. "Career. Family, Relationships. Even in bed. And then... when I couldn't prove anything that first night... I felt like I failed."

"You didn't fail," she said softly. "You froze. That's human."

Viren felt a lump rise in his throat. Her compassion was disarming. It made him want to confess things he hadn't told even himself. **"Why are you so kind to me?"**

Sushima touched his face, tracing the line of his jaw. **"Because you're not pretentious, at least not anymore."**

Outside, the sky had turned a deep blue, the kind that comes after heavy rain. The world looked washed clean, like everything bad had been rinsed away and replaced with something quieter, not joy, exactly, but peace.

As they rose, made tea, and shared stories from their past, their real pasts, not the ones polished for first

impressions, Viren realized that what he had feared most was never failure.

It was being seen. Fully. Naked not in body, but in soul. And somehow, that was exactly what Sushima offered him, not perfection, but presence.

When he left Sushima's house, Viren felt extremely happy that he was whistling his favourite song, **"You Really Love a Woman"**, and then that drum portion came, which Ritu mastered. Oh fuck, Ritu..... With a sudden heavy brake, Viren stopped his car, right in the middle of the way to his flat. Parked the car on the side, searched for his dashboard, took out a cigarette packet, lit a cigarette, and started to smoke. He never smoked except when Ritu was around, as he never wanted to let her feel awkward. He couldn't ever match the style of Ritu in the art of smoking; however, he always wanted to make Ritu feel normal.

Viren was inhaling each puff and exhaling Ritu with every drag. When one cigarette was finished, he lit one more from the first one, "Trailing", as Ritu used to call it. **While Viren was on his last puff, he couldn't control himself and called Ritu yet again!**

And like all times in the first few rings, only the heartbeats increased. Viren was almost about to cut when suddenly something happened that had not happened in almost three years.

Ritu picked the call!

Hi Viren, how are you? (Ritu Said)

Viren got so damn nervous that he immediately cut the call.

He called up Ritu to be rejected again, he never could imagine that she would pick up his call.....

In the strange excitement and confusion, Viren ignited the engine and started driving towards his flat. And right when he was about to reach his flat, his phone started to ring. He got extremely scared, his heart was pounding at the speed of a jet, he could almost choke in thinking how and what he would talk to Ritu, and suddenly he realised.

It was Sushima and not Ritu!

What the damn fuck, why is she calling him? Viren had always been too much in Ritu that any gal calling him or trying to get close to him felt like an intruder in between him and Ritu.

But Viren, she is Sushima, the same girl with whom you had perhaps one of the most romantic intercours, that too three, last night.

In the absolute zero moment of truth, Viren picked up the phone and called Sushima, however, her phone was busy, and for no good and explainable reason, he called up Ritu. Who again picked up the call in five flat rings.....

One Call that got answered



Viren spoke to Ritu after exactly 3 years, 5 months, 6 days, 1251 Days in total, and approximately 30024 hours!! Not that he had counted them. But somehow, his heart had. Each day had passed with the weight of her absence, each hour a quiet echo of conversations never had, apologies never spoken, feelings never resolved. Time hadn't just moved forward; it had lingered, stretched, and sometimes stood still in her memory. And now, after all that relentless silence, one call had bridged the chasm of years, an ordinary moment carrying the gravity of an entire chapter left unwritten.

Though it was not a long conversation, just casual greetings, and Ritu told Viren that she knows he is living in Delhi and she will be travelling to Delhi next week for her Birthday, so they may meet on her Birthday!! Ritu had always been the one with the steering wheel, and Viren had always taken this privilege of being dependent on her. Though this version of Viren is absolutely in contradiction of his original personality of being a control freak, as Viren is one guy who likes to do things as per his natural self, however, with Ritu, he always led the path, believing in the magic. So, as always, **He just replied, ok, as you say.** 1 minute and 42 seconds phone call that seemed like connecting all the dots that were scattered in those 30,000 + hours of silence between them. None of

them complained about those unanswered phone calls, unread messages, or her marriage or their breakup. None of them expressed sadness, anger, betrayal, or broken heart; none of them sounded as if they were in some hurry or excitement. It felt like a normal phone call, which is made between people **“who are always attached, who are always in touch”**.

Viren felt an overwhelming sense of relief, as if releasing a tension he hadn't realized he'd been carrying for a long time. In that moment of ease, it struck him how little satisfaction he had truly felt during his time with Sushima. He actually purposely tried to recall last night that he had spent with Sushima and those love-making sessions which have taken place between them, to revisit how he had felt. It wasn't that he meant to belittle what they had shared; rather, the realization highlighted **just how much Ritu meant to him**. A simple conversation with her had somehow brought everything in his life into perspective.

It was Thursday today, July 3rd, and Ritu's Birthday is on the 12th. Sushima told me that she's going to her hometown on the weekend and she asked him to drop her off at the airport. Viren got relieved thinking that Sushima wouldn't be in the city when Ritu would come, though it's Delhi, where 2 km is travelled in 20-25 minutes, and everything seems so far off, yet to Viren, meeting someone else while being in a relationship with someone else felt like cheating.

But who is Viren in a relationship with?

Is it Sushima? the sweet gal who had managed to convince Viren to break his celibacy after his breakup with Ritu ?

Somehow, even when trying to attempt hard to answer this question, Viren couldn't find an affirmative answer and instead of pressuring his little mind, he just shrugged off this question and thought of solving this complex equation later.

Presently, Viren had just two tasks at hand, one was to stay in his best form till he meets Ritu, because he knows that if he were even 5% messy, Ritu would get 95% mad. And the second task, to meet Sushima twice at least (including the one-time to drop her off at the airport, though he hates to pick and drop anyone, as it seems very difficult for Viren to say Goodbye). He immediately calculated and decided the days too. He would meet Sushima tomorrow evening after work, take her to coffee, and drop her off at her apartment, and then on Saturday, he would ask her to come over to his apartment or he would go to hers and they would watch a movie, spend some time, and on Sunday, he would drop her off at the airport. Though Viren was sure that as of now he would not be able to be physically intimate with Sushima, not until he meets Ritu. And then from Monday onwards, he can think about Ritu in a fully-fledged mode with no disturbance. So, with each day planned in his mind for the week ahead, he simply started to whistle one of his favourite songs again- **Aaoge Jab tum Saajna..... !!!**

The Night of Unspoken Words



It was July 12th, finally, the day had come when Ritu said she would meet Viren. Viren was so restless for many days, yet knowing Ritu, he didn't pester and sent many texts to her. He just sent Happy Birthday and shared his address with one line that read **"I am waiting for you, Ritu, like I was waiting always"**.

The last time Viren had seen Ritu, the autumn air had still carried the scent of change and endings. Now more than **three full years** had passed, and the city had aged around them like a quiet observer. Buildings had gained new coats of paint, people had moved on, and lives had shifted like sand under a tide, but the weight of that one name, Ritu, hadn't moved an inch in Viren's heart. He remembered all birthdays spent with her like one remembers an old scar, something that hurt once but never quite disappeared.

Viren waited the whole day for her message and call, and then, right when he had lost all hope and expectations to hear from her, around 8:00 PM, her message flashed on his mobile screen; his heart stuttered, like an old violin string trembling to life.

"I'm near your building... Can we meet for a bit?"

He read it again. And again. Every instinct told him to ignore it, to let time keep doing what it does best, burying

feelings beneath routine. **But love doesn't vanish. It hibernates.** And the name Ritu still lived somewhere under his skin. Viren stared at the message for too long before replying. The hesitation **wasn't about her.** It was about the **world around her**, now a world where she had a husband and a home that wasn't his. And then the hesitation of **meeting her after three years**, and then **letting her go for many years again.**

But then again, this was Ritu we were talking about, “**a paradox in motion**”, like a sweet, disarming **earthquake** capable of unsettling your very core with a smile. Her presence was never ordinary; it carried a force that could quietly upend your emotional balance. As he stepped out into the garden, the soft rustle of leaves greeted him, and so did she, already there, as if the world had arranged itself in anticipation of her arrival. But Viren got stuck for about a minute.

Isn't she looking a bit different?

Has she gained weight? “Doesn't matter and doesn't look like”!

Has she lost weight? “Doesn't matter and doesn't look like”!

Has she got herself a new haircut? Yes, her hair looks about two inches shorter than before, with a few lines of white, marking that she is having a few grey hairs.

Why is she wearing such a long dress? Forget it? why is she wearing a dress? She doesn't need to behave like a girl in front of Viren!!!!

What's wrong? Her Eyes look swollen; her face looks puffed, and somehow, she was looking extremely tired.

She stood beneath the lamplight like something out of an aching memory, draped in a soft maroon maxi dress that barely concealed the chill in the air or the restlessness in her eyes. Married eyes now. Eyes that belonged to someone else. But tonight, she looked at him as if nothing had changed. Or maybe everything had, except the space between them.

"Hey," she said softly.

He swallowed. "Hi..."

For a moment, they just stood there, staring.

"You really came," he said softly.

"I shouldn't have," she replied. "But I couldn't stop myself."

He gave a small, almost broken smile. "Happy birthday, Ritu."

Her lips curved into the saddest kind of smile. "It is now." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. It was a smile built with broken bricks.

"I didn't want to come up," she said before he could offer. "I thought it might complicate things."

He nodded, grateful. And also, heartbroken.

They sat on their old bench, silent at first. But the silence between them wasn't hollow; it pulsed with all the things they'd once shared. Her hand was close to his on the bench, and for a long while, he simply stared at it, aching

to hold it, terrified to. The world around them blurred cars, footsteps, and lights in faraway windows. Their silence was not empty. It was overflowing with things they didn't dare say aloud.

Eventually, he spoke, "Do you remember the first time I brought you tea in the garden near my PG?"

She laughed gently, her eyes lighting up. "And you spilled half of it because your hands were shaking."

"I was nervous," he admitted. "I was falling for you."

She turned to him, her eyes softer now. "You had already fallen."

Their fingers brushed once, unintentionally. Then again, deliberately. Slowly, like music building toward a quiet crescendo, her hand slid into his. And he held it like it was still breakable.

As the night deepened, they moved to another bench, laughing about old fights, recalling a trip that never happened, sharing glances that said more than words ever could. The cool breeze carried the scent of night jasmine, and Viren gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"You still do that," she whispered. "Every time I wear my hair down."

"I still want to take care of you," he replied without thinking.

Now and then, she would laugh low and familiar. And each time she did, he felt something inside him unravel, thread by delicate thread. She talked about work, about

her dog, about a vacation she never went on. Not once did she mention her husband. And he didn't ask. **There were ghosts neither of them wanted to wake.**

Time stretched. They shifted from one bench to another, like teenagers lost in the safety of stolen hours. Somewhere near midnight, a neighbour's speaker floated out an old ghazal haunting, melodic, soaked in longing. Ritu stood, held out her hand, a glint in her eye that was dangerously close to a tear.

"I've missed your voice," Ritu said, her words landing like a tremor in Viren's chest.

He closed his eyes. That voice still had the same effect. It still made everything else feel quieter.

"I didn't know if I had even lost the right to call," he said after a moment. "You have a life now. A world I'm not part of anymore."

Ritu exhaled slowly. "You always had the right. You just... rejected me, Viren. You didn't even fight; you just dragged me out of your life mercilessly. I felt I was an orphan when you left me without even giving me time to absorb it."

Viren felt her words like glass under his skin. "You also chose someone else. What was I supposed to fight for? A door that had already closed?"

"It didn't close," she said, voice tight. "It slammed shut because you didn't know how to keep it open. Because you were too proud, too young to hold on."

He went silent. Her anger wasn't loud, but it was honest. And somewhere deep inside, he knew she was right.

"I couldn't bear to know you were happy without me," he confessed, his voice cracking. "And I couldn't live with myself if I became a reason, you weren't."

There was another long pause, and then her tone softened. **"I'm not unhappy, Viren... but I'm not whole either."**

There was intense silence again. Heavy. Charged. Two lives had gone on without each other, but nothing felt resolved. And then, without hesitation, she leaned her head against his shoulder.

He froze.

Every nerve in his body screamed to respond, to hold her tighter, to say things he wasn't supposed to. But he stayed still, afraid that even breathing too loudly would break the moment.

She whispered, "I don't know what this is... or what it means."

"I don't either," he murmured. "But I don't want it to end."

His head lowered gently until it rested against hers, and they stood like that for what felt like a lifetime, wrapped in the weight of all they had lost and the fragile beauty of what they still held.

Her eyes shimmered in the low light. Then, shyly, "Dance with me?"

No music. No audience. Just them and the hush of night.

She stepped close, fitting perfectly into his arms like she always had. He held her tightly, one hand on her lower back, the other on her shoulder blade. Her fingers slid around his neck, drawing him closer.

They swayed, slowly, breathing in each other's silence.

His cheek brushed against her temple. Her lips accidentally grazed his collarbone. It wasn't passion in its loudest form; it was something more dangerous. More tender. Like **two hearts confessing love with every heartbeat.**

Later, just before dawn, they sat back down this time on a bench in the far corner of the garden, barely speaking. Ritu curled her legs under her and lay her head back on his shoulder again, and this time, he let himself relax into her warmth.

They sat there, still and close, the kind of closeness that doesn't demand explanation.

When the sky began to turn pale, she sat up, her expression unreadable.

The sky was bleeding faint pink at the edges now. A gentle breeze stirred the trees, and the first sounds of the city awakening were beginning to hum in the distance, a reminder that time, no matter how still it felt between them, would keep moving.

Ritu slowly stood from the bench, brushing the creases from her frock, not quite meeting his eyes. Viren rose too,

hesitant. Neither of them knew what to say. Neither of them wanted to break the spell.

"I should go," she whispered, her voice fragile with meaning.

He nodded, swallowing the ache rising in his throat. "Yeah..."

But neither moved.

And then, as if drawn by some invisible thread, **they stepped into each other's arms.**

The hug was slow.

Deliberate.

Not rushed, not nervous. Just two people folding into one another quietly, reverently.

Ritu pressed her face into the side of his neck, her breath soft and warm against his skin. Her hands curled behind his shoulders, not gripping, just **being**. Her body leaned into his, chest to chest, heart to heart, as though she was remembering how it once felt to be held with no questions, no consequences, only care.

Viren's arms wrapped around her waist, gently, protectively, pulling her closer until the space between them was a shared silence. He didn't try to speak. There was nothing left to say. He simply held her like a man anchoring himself to the only moment that still felt real.

Her scent, jasmine, and something familiar he could never name filled his lungs. The softness of her hair

brushed his jaw as she shifted slightly, fitting herself even deeper into his arms, like she belonged there.

And in that stillness, something stirred not lust, not urgency, but a quieter, heavier passion. The kind that hums beneath the surface. **The kind that makes your skin remember. That makes you ache gently, not because of what you want, but because of what you can no longer have fully.**

Ritu tightened her grip, just a little. Her hands slid slowly over his back, as if memorizing him all over again. **Viren's thumb moved in a small, absent circle against her spine, a touch that said I'm still here, even when words failed.**

Neither of them spoke of time.

Or marriage.

Or the morning.

They just stayed in that embrace for a few minutes, maybe more, letting their bodies speak a language their mouths couldn't.

Before words could find their way between them, Ritu stepped forward and embraced Viren once more, this time with a depth that transcended physicality. It was not the urgency of desire that shaped her grip, but the weight of unspoken emotion, a quiet ache that had long been denied expression. The hug was fuller, fiercer, yet aching tender, an unvoiced confession wrapped in silence. Then, as if the looming distance between them **demanding a sudden act of rebellion**, she lifted her head and placed a gentle kiss on the side of his neck, delicate,

unplanned, yet laden with meaning. Viren's body tensed, not in resistance, but in the quiet shock of being seen, of being wanted in a way that stirred something deeper. It wasn't discomfort from the gesture itself, but from how deeply he welcomed it and how, despite the urge to reciprocate, he found himself held back by the **very hesitation that had so often kept his heart guarded.**

Eventually, she exhaled a quiet breath, her cheek pressed to his shoulder. "I needed this more than I realized," she said, almost inaudibly.

"So did I," he replied, his voice raw.

They didn't part immediately. Even when the hug began to loosen, their **hands lingered, fingers tracing down arms, pausing at wrists, reluctant to let go.**

When she finally stepped back, her eyes were shining. Not with tears, but with something more dangerous, **remembered love.** As Ritu began to pull away from the hug, Viren gently took her left hand in his, not ready to let go of her completely. **Without speaking, he turned her wrist upward and began to softly run his fingers over the delicate skin, right where her pulse fluttered quickly, fragile, alive.** It was almost as if he was listening to her heart through the rhythm there, tracing her silence with touch. Slowly, reverently, his fingertip began to draw a familiar circle on the inside of her wrist, and then, as always, he placed a single dot in the center. His symbol. His way of saying, **Come back.** His silent cry: **There are things we left half-spoken. Half-lived. I'm not complete... and neither are you.** Ritu didn't pull her hand away. She just stood there, eyes downcast, letting

him draw on her skin the ache they both carried the ache of an unfinished story.

"Take care of yourself," she said gently.

"You too," he murmured.

She turned and walked slowly toward the gate, and this time, just before stepping out, she paused, turned around, and looked at him.

And he gave her a small, broken smile.

She returned it.

Then she was gone.

Viren stood in the garden alone, the morning wind now curling around his empty arms. But her warmth remained in his breath, his heartbeat, his skin. In the kind of hug that doesn't end when it ends. **He held his own left hand in his right and tried to feel the hand of Ritu in absolute detail.**

She was there, right there, and He was gone with her!!

Reaching back at his flat, he again took out his diary and tried to re-picture the circle and the dot and wrote-

He used to draw circles on her left wrist.

slow spirals, shyly, abruptly,

carrying the enormous sublime decree

warm enough to ignite deep serendipity,

Though her skin was cold as parchment

His touch felt like the ink of eternity high.

Like a thousand sprigs freshly plucked
To make the whole world look bright
As trees shed bark, one tissue over the other
Sputtering the echoes of desire to whisper
At the center, he'd press a dot
which she perceived as a quiet promise,
the still heart of his wandering line,
as if to say, **"I will always return here."**
Now, only memory traces the shape,
ghost-rings that bloom beneath her pulse.
The dot is gone, yet it lingers
the way stars linger in daylight,
meaningless and unseen.
And there is She,
still turning in his orbit,
carry those circles like constellations,
a map of love
that time could not erase.....

The Rosebud and the Silence



Viren was not happy after meeting Ritu on her birthday night. There was a strange state that he was in, perhaps a state that told him that something was not right. He had felt it the moment he saw her on her birthday, the slight dimming of her usual sparkle, the way her smile lingered a moment too long as though compensating for something unspoken. Ritu had never been one to hide her emotions well, at least not from him. That day, beneath the cheerful greetings and the customary laughter, Viren had sensed a quiet disquiet in her, a silence louder than her words.

Later that night, he stared at her WhatsApp profile picture longer than usual before typing a message.

“Can we meet again? Just once more.

There’s something I want to talk about... or maybe just sit with you for a while.”

She replied, much to his surprise:

“Wednesday, 11:15. Don’t get up late. We shall meet at your flat”.

That reply wasn't just an agreement; it was a signal. Ritu never met casually unless there was something deeply important. Viren knew then: **something was seriously wrong.**

He took leave from work, cancelling meetings and ignoring the stack of unread emails. As he sat brooding at his desk, her parting words came back to him from the birthday night:

"One day, I want to eat something cooked by you. But not if you kill me with it."

She had laughed, and he had, too. But now, it didn't seem like just a joke. It felt like a plea for comfort. And he clung to that. So began his two-day crash course in cooking Rajma Chawal, her all-time favourite. YouTube videos, blogs, and desperate calls to his mother, it became a project of purpose. He didn't want to impress her. He just wanted her to feel safe. Maybe even at home.

Wednesday, 11:15 AM sharp.

The doorbell rang.

She stood there in a white anarkali, delicate jhumkas swaying, and a beautiful red rosebud tucked carefully in her hair, a subtle rebellion of beauty in her otherwise tired presence. She still kept her promises. Still cared about being on time. Viren smiled, remembering how punctuality had once been a shared joke between them, now turned into something admirable.

They sat, talked about usual things, weather, food, his disastrous cooking journey, and somewhere in between, as Ritu leaned forward to pick up a glass, Viren noticed faint, reddish, blueish, blackish marks on her back, visible just enough through the curve of her neckline.

He tried to make light of it.

“Does your MLA husband beat you with his leather belt or what?”

A chuckle meant to dismiss.

Ritu didn't laugh. Her lips trembled.

“Yes,” amongst many other things that he uses to invade me, she said.

Then, the dam broke.

She cried, quietly at first, then in waves. She told him everything. The humiliation, the control, the violence masked behind closed doors. She had come to Delhi not for work, not for a break, but to get an **abortion**, a word that hung in the room like a scream.

“I can't bring a child into this hell,” she whispered, and she also told how on her birthday, only she got the procedure done, and that's how she was not reachable the whole day on her Birthday!!

Viren felt a sharp twist in his stomach. His legs moved before he could think. The washroom door slammed. He retched. He vomited so much that it felt as if he wouldn't be able to hold even water in his stomach. This was the result of disgust but grief. From rage. From helplessness.

When he returned, Ritu had curled into the corner of the sofa, eyes closed, face peaceful in a way that felt sacred. **She was sleeping, not pretending, not resting, really sleeping.** The kind of sleep that comes after letting go of pain you've held for too long. She looked like a child. **A tired, bruised, beautiful child finally allowed to breathe.**

Viren sat next to her, silently. He didn't touch her. Just watched. He cried, too. Not loudly, not bitterly. But gently, for her. For the versions of her that had smiled through it all.

Exactly 1 hour and 48 minutes later, her eyes opened.

And then, it happened. That smile. The real one, not the courteous one she gave the world, but the smile that lived in her eyes, that made them glow like they held secrets made of light. It was the smile he had fallen for all those years ago. The one he hadn't seen in forever.

Viren whispered, voice low and trembling,

"Can I hug you, Ritu?"

She didn't answer. She didn't need to.

**He reached for her and held her. Tight. Gently. Deeply.
For five long minutes, the world stood still.**

The Storm Inside



Viren sat alone in the dim light of the living room, long after Ritu had left. The air still carried traces of her lavender perfume and the faint smell of rajma masala. But nothing felt warm anymore. Not the room. Not the sun outside. Not even the walls that had once echoed with their laughter.

He was burning.

Not with rage alone, but with a cocktail of emotions that had no name, no beginning, and certainly no end.

Anger. Helplessness. Disgust. Pity. Fear. Love.

It all came crashing in waves.

The words she had spoken casually, softly, brokenly, without drama, kept ringing in his ears like sirens:

“Yes. He hits me.” “He forces himself upon me whenever he wants to”.

“Sometimes with a belt. Once with a tennis racket. A few times with... a stick he had got from his friend in the Police. For fun. He spills food on me if the food isn’t to his taste, and he had broken 2-3 wipers while hitting her through them.”

For fun. For expressing his frustration, for no reason most of the time.

That phrase haunted him more than anything else. What kind of monster found fun in pain?

Viren clenched his fists. His nails dug into his own skin, as if pain would somehow make sense of hers. But nothing did.

He couldn't stop picturing it.

Ritu "His Ritu" the flamboyant, loud, unfiltered, untameable Ritu... being reduced to flinching, shrinking, hiding. Her back was marked not just by bruises but by humiliation. Her soul scarred not by the blows, but by the betrayal of the very person who had vowed to protect her.

The Belt

The Racket

The Rope

The Whiskey Glass

The Stick

Every image stabbed at his imagination, until he felt physically sick again. He wondered how she had endured it. How many nights had she cried herself to sleep? How many mornings had she worn long sleeves and fake smiles?

But worse than the physical torment, it was the wounds she didn't show that haunted him more.

What had they done to her spirit?

The spirit that once wrote poetry on café napkins and laughed in cinema halls at scenes no one else found funny. The spirit that danced barefoot in the rain and

argued passionately about books and politics and the meaning of life. The spirit that used to guide her for simply approaching strangers, if she had even in her whims, guessed that those people needed some form of support. The number of times Ritu had given her jacket or slippers to beggars on the road, as she couldn't tolerate the condition of their feet. She had scolded and beaten two drunk guys who were trying to touch a small, beggar girl inappropriately, without even caring for her own safety and security.

He felt pity deep, aching pity. But he knew he couldn't show it.

Ritu hated pity.

If she sensed it, even in the slightest of gestures, she would bolt. That's who she was. Proud. Independent. She had the kind of strength that came from refusing sympathy, from carrying her battles silently so the world wouldn't mistake her for weak.

And so, Viren was trapped in a strange prison, jeopardized, really, where he couldn't cry for her, couldn't rage for her, couldn't even care for her in ways that felt natural. Every emotion had to be carefully measured, like medicine with dangerous side effects.

He wanted to help. Desperately.

But how?

How much is too much? How little is cowardice?

Most pressing was this wild, irrational urge to see her again. Not just talk. Not just chat.

He needed to see her wounds—all of it, all her physical marks, all her mental trauma.

Not to confirm her pain, he believed her without question, but to understand it, to bear witness to it. To carry even a fraction of her burden in his own eyes.

But how does a man ask a woman to show her bruises? How do you say “Let me look at your pain, so I can hold it with you”?

He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know if he should do anything at all.

Should he confront her husband? Should he call the police? Should he offer her money to escape, a place to hide, a way out?

Would she let him?

His mind spun with impossible questions and terrifying scenarios. But above all, a single, silent fear pulsed in his chest:

“What if she never comes back?”

What if today had been her last visit? What if the story she told wasn’t just a confession, but a goodbye?

And worse, what if she felt more pain from his concern than from her husband’s cruelty?

Viren rubbed his face, exhausted. He had never felt so utterly lost. For a man who lived by logic and language, no book, no quote, no learned insight had prepared him for this moment. This was not a problem to be solved.

It was a soul to be held, ever so gently.

And he didn't know if he was strong enough. But he wanted to be.

For her.

For his Ritu

And

He wanted to see Ritu like what Ritu used to be!!

If he could define Ritu, he would define Ritu as “**Ganga descending from the Himalayas**”. Pure, pristine, fiery yet full of love, one who can accommodate the sins of all and yet provide only blessings. One who's the same whether consumed for the **Birth and Mundan Sanskar** or the **Death and Shradha Sanskar**. Whose early course is steep and wild. She crashes through narrow gorges and thunders down rocky slopes, her voice a sacred roar in the mountain air. The forests of deodar and pine watch silently as she carves her path, sometimes in fury, sometimes in song. As she descends, she gathers strength from tributaries and mountain springs, growing broader and louder with each passing mile. A river now full of character, neither just sacred water nor just geography, but a living symbol of faith, resilience, and renewal.

And suddenly Viren realised that his phone was profusely vibrating, he saw 12 missed calls from Sushima and 27 WhatsApp messages from her. He should have been very happy to get so much attention; however, all that he felt was disgust and hatred that she was intruding on his thoughts related to Ritu right now. He just switched off his mobile and again started to think about all that he had been thinking for the last many hours.

Goodbyes are often Pleasant



Delhi Airport bustled with its usual sense of rhythm, passengers wheeling suitcases across polished floors, announcements droning overhead, and Costa, Starbucks, and Barista shouting out coffee orders like auctioneers. But for Viren, everything was a distant blur. The only sound he could hear was the storm inside his own head. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting a sterile glow over the hurried travellers, last-minute goodbyes, and quiet reunions. But for Viren, the world had narrowed to the storm of thoughts thundering inside his head.

Two sleepless nights. That's how long it had been since he had found out the truth.

Ritu, "his Ritu," had been living a life of torment behind the closed doors of her seemingly perfect marriage. Not gossip, not hearsay, but documented truth that she confessed her own self. A broken shoulder. A burn on her back from a steaming iron. And worse still, lashings from a leather belt, the kind that left deep, ugly bruises across her back and lower body. Her skin, once soft and untouchable, now bore a landscape of pain hidden beneath layers of carefully chosen clothing and even more carefully chosen silence. And she had kept it all buried, stitched behind the fabric of silk sarees, political appearances, and practiced smiles.

Viren couldn't breathe when he heard it. First came the nausea for two days, he couldn't eat one portion of food without draining out it as vomiting right after. Then rage. Then helplessness. He had wandered the city at night, unable to sleep, only haunted by what she must have endured, what she must still be enduring.

He told himself a thousand times not to go to the airport. That it wasn't his place. That would only make things worse.

But then again, hadn't things already been worse?

And so, he stood there now, sweating under his t-shirt, eyes scanning every face near Gate 3. His heart stammered as he saw her, Ritu. She looked poised, as always. Dressed in a deep maroon kurta with a cream dupatta, her face was calm, way too calm. She had learned to master the art of masking pain, he realized. But he could see it now, even if no one else could. The way her shoulders stiffened slightly. There was a slight limp in her walk. The way her eyes avoided meeting anyone else's for too long.

She wasn't alone.

Two men in safari suits flanked her, PSOs, clearly. And then, as Viren's eyes moved, he froze.

Sandeep.

MLA Sandeep Thakur was standing a few feet behind her, engaged in quiet conversation with someone on the phone. His presence was unmistakable. The towering frame. The sharp, calculating eyes. And that air of arrogance that reeked of impunity.

Viren's chest tightened.

His hands trembled.

And then he just moved.

No strategy. No caution. Just raw, desperate instinct.

He walked past the crowd and stood right in front of her. She stopped, blinking in disbelief.

Before she could say anything, **he grabbed her hand.**

"Ritu," he said, loud enough for people around to pause and turn, "I know that for two years you've lived in hell, and I stood outside like a coward. But I won't anymore. I can't let you go back to this monster."

The words came out in a torrent, choked with anguish and frustration. The crowd began to murmur. Phones started recording. The PSOs stiffened and moved closer.

Sandeep's voice thundered like a sudden storm.

"What the hell is going on?" he barked, storming toward them. His eyes landed on Viren and then narrowed into slits. "You?"

He turned to the PSO. "Throw him out. Now."

The security man lunged forward but before he could lay a finger on Viren, something unexpected happened.

Ritu raised her hand and slapped Viren across the face.

The slap echoed through the terminal. Time froze. Even the PSOs halted mid-step.

Her voice was cold. Firm. Piercing. Ritu's eyes were aflame not with fear, but with a raw, cutting disappointment that pierced deeper than any wound.

"Viren," she said, eyes blazing, "I never thought you would humiliate me like this."

He blinked, stunned. "I what?"

"You... you were supposed to understand me. Don't disgrace me. This damn circus in front of the world... this is the second time you've proven to be the worst decision of my life."

And just like that, she pulled her hand away from his grasp and walked ahead without another word.

Sandeep gave Viren a scornful, triumphant smirk before marching after her, his rage barely contained. Those who saw him walk could feel the tremors of something darker brewing. **There was a chill in his posture, "a promise of further cruelty". And now, with Ritu's public dismissal of Viren, that cruelty would find no restraint.**

Viren didn't move.

He stood there, amidst a sea of strangers and judgmental eyes, as the weight of failure settled back onto his shoulders.

He had come to save her. To speak the truth. To break her chains.

Instead, she had slapped him.

She had walked away.

And her captor followed her home.

Viren remained rooted to the ground.

Alone.

Confused.

Helpless.

Once again, a spectator.

And once again, powerless to stop it.

Viren's mind again went blank. For 3-4 seconds, he couldn't understand anything, and boom, he just fell on the ground. With great difficulty, he almost dragged himself out of the airport and booked a cab to his flat.

Collapse- An Architecture of Fractured Symphony



For five days, the walls of Viren's apartment became both his refuge and his prison.

Curtains drawn. Phone switched off. Food untouched. The city outside continued its rhythm, wild horns, rain, hawkers, deadlines, but for Viren, time had ceased to matter. He lay on the floor for hours, replaying every frame of that scene at the airport. The slap. The crowd. Ritu's words. Her cold dismissal. Sandeep's eyes are like a snake's, always ready to spit venom.

And yet, the worst was her silence after.

She had blocked him.

On everything.

WhatsApp. Calls. Instagram. Even email.

Viren had been deleted from her life, as if his existence was just an inconvenient memory she had finally shed.

But he couldn't stop thinking about her. He didn't know where she was. Or how badly Sandeep had reacted. The airport scene had given everything away. Sandeep had seen the pain in Ritu's eyes and seen how much Viren knew. There was no way the man had walked out of that quietly. Ritu must have suffered severely.

Because of him.

He kept trying to remind himself he meant well. That he only wanted to protect her.

But in the end, he had only made things worse.

The guilt gnawed at him. The rejection crushed his ego. The uncertainty about Ritu's safety tore his soul apart.

By the fifth day, he hadn't spoken a word to anyone. He vomited every sip of water and ate almost nothing.

Then came the ferocious knock.**Heavy. Repeated. Almost angry.**

He ignored it at first, assuming it was just another delivery guy. Then the voice came through loud and unmistakable.

"Viren! What the hell! Where are you? I've been calling for hours!"

He pulled himself up and dragged his feet to the door.

And there she was.

Sushima.

Hair tied back in frustration. Trolley bag next to her. Sweat on her forehead and fury in her eyes.

"You forgot?" she shouted. "I told you a hundred times I'm flying in today! You were supposed to pick me up, Viren! My phone calls, your phone was off! I thought something had happened to you!"

Viren stared at her blankly. He hadn't just forgotten. He hadn't even remembered she existed in these five days.

"I waited at the airport like a fool," she went on. "You weren't answering, I had no idea what was going on, and are you even listening to me"?

But Viren didn't reply.

His knees buckled. His body collapsed, slow and sudden like a building caving in from the inside.

"Viren!" she screamed as she ran to hold him. His skin was cold. His lips pale. His eyes rolled back.

The next thing Viren remembered was white lights and the faint beeping of machines.

Voices blurred in the background. A woman sobbing. Another whispering. The sterile smell of antiseptic filled his nose.

He opened his eyes slowly, squinting against the harsh light above him.

A nurse noticed and said something he didn't hear. And then —

"Ritu..."

It was the first word that escaped his lips.

He hadn't even meant to say it.

But it was all that lived in his consciousness.

The room went silent for a second.

And then he heard his mother cry out.

"My child... my son is awake..."

She rushed to his side, breaking down, her hands on his forehead. Sushima was standing a little away, red-eyed, staring at the floor. Two of his office friends stood behind her, their faces tight with concern.

His mother caressed his cheek, speaking in gasps. "Thank God... You scared me, Viren... What's happening to you? Why are you destroying yourself like this?"

He wanted to respond. To say something. But his mind raced in another direction.

The phone. The chats.

Ritu's messages. The voice notes. The photos. The confessions.

Panic shot through his body.

Had Sushima gone through it?

Had she read everything?

His mother wept softly, not noticing the sudden tension in his eyes.

Sushima stepped forward, hesitant. Her voice cracked. "You need to rest, Viren. Don't try to speak."

He looked at her, really looked.

And he couldn't tell.

She knew something. Maybe everything. Or maybe nothing.

But the damage was already done.

The room was filled with people who cared.

And all he could think of... was a woman who had walked away.

A woman who had blocked him.

A woman who might be suffering, right now, in silence again.

And this time, Viren didn't know if he'd ever get the chance to help her again.

Shadows and Shelter- Mirage and Wonders



After three long days under the sterile lights and quiet monitors of the hospital, Viren was finally discharged. Though his body was on the mend, the real wounds, the ones that couldn't be stitched or scanned, still lingered deep inside him.

By his side through it all had been Sushima.

She hadn't just sat beside his hospital bed, adjusting his pillow or fetching him soup. She had held space for his silence, answered the doctor's questions when his mind wandered, and, perhaps most nobly, cared for his mother, Maya, who herself had been unravelling for years, watching her only son wither under the weight of a love that had long gone cold.

It was Maya who spoke the words that would change everything:

"Why don't you stay with us for a few days, beta?" she said to Sushima, her voice tired but hopeful. "I think... I think Viren needs someone like you now, and not even me."

The three of them returned to Viren's apartment that afternoon. The familiar furniture looked different somehow, like it too had aged during his hospital stay. Maya, clutching her small travel bag, announced that she would leave for Gwalior the next morning. She left no

room for argument. Her faith now rested in Sushima, the only person who had managed to pull Viren even an inch out of his darkness.

That evening, after Maya had gone to bed, the apartment was quiet except for the clinking of mugs and the humming of the fridge. Sushima sat across from Viren, eyes focused but gentle.

"I need to tell you something," she said, her voice steady but low. "While you were in the hospital... I checked your phone."

Viren blinked. His heart stopped for half a beat.

"I saw her name," Sushima continued. "Ritu."

There was a long silence.

He opened his mouth, unsure of what to say, but Sushima raised a hand. **"If Ritu is in the past, let her stay there. I don't want to know anything unless she's coming back."**

The words struck him like ice water. Is Ritu coming back? They echoed in his mind over and over. Even as he looked at Sushima sitting there in his living room, her presence so real and grounding, his thoughts drifted away, into the unreachable space where Ritu still lived.

But Ritu's world was far from peaceful.

Somewhere else, in a different Metaverse, far from Delhi's quiet suburbs, Ritu was enduring yet another nightmare. Her husband, Sandeep, had guests over, loud, self-righteous men debating law and power. The room smelled of alcohol and arrogance.

When Ritu, calmly but firmly, tried to challenge their narrative about women "misusing" laws meant to protect them, the atmosphere turned icy.

"You speak too much," Sandeep muttered, voice slurred but dangerous.

Moments later, rage took over. A bottle shattered. The guests scattered. What followed was not seen, not by many but felt deeply by one.

Ritu was left broken again, discarded in a house that had never been a home.

Sandeep stripped her naked right there by pulling down her jeans, bending her over the dining table, while one of his friends was still standing on the door, he raped her right there in front of his friend and passed all sanity by even asking his friend if he wanted to join!!!!

Ritu felt like a whore, a cheap whore, even worse, as she wasn't even getting paid for her services.

She suddenly prayed in her rebellion mode that at least the friend of Sandeep had fucked her!!

what a whore she had become!!

An Unexpected Rhythm



Sushima moved in quietly, bringing with her nothing but a single suitcase, a set of herbal teas, and her grounded calm. Their chemistry was... unexpected. They would talk for hours while cooking, Sushima chopping onions, tomatoes, potatoes with methodical grace, Viren stirring the dal too slowly, distracted but still smiling when she teased him about his turmeric proportions.

In the mornings, they'd do yoga together on the balcony. Sushima would correct his posture mid-pose, her hands lingering on his back a second too long. In the evenings, their laughter echoed through the rooms, shared jokes, accidental soap bubbles in the bathroom, and her humming old Kishore Kumar songs while shampooing her hair.

Nights were slower, quieter.

They made love without frenzy, but with a kind of soft, unfolding understanding. Sushima knew his rhythms, his silences. She never asked him to confess love, never demanded anything he wasn't ready to give.

But Viren.....his body may have learned Sushima's curves like a map, his lips may have remembered her sighs like poetry, but his heart wandered constantly. In the dim glow of the nightlight, his mind was tracing **the sharp edge of Ritu's slap, her**

final glare, the way she had walked away without looking back.

Every time Sushima lay with him, he felt both gratitude and guilt, grateful for her presence, guilty for the absences in his soul.

One night, after a particularly intimate moment, Sushima lay with her head on his chest, her fingers drawing invisible patterns.

“You’re still somewhere else, aren’t you?” she asked, softly.

Viren didn’t respond right away. The ceiling fan above spun like a hypnotic clock.

“Yes,” he finally said. **“I don’t want to be. But I am.”**

Sushima nodded, her expression unreadable. “It’s okay. I knew the moment I unpacked my bag here... that **I was moving into a heart half-occupied.**”

They continued living together, not out of obligation, but because sometimes, shared silence is still better than solitude. Their mornings remained warm, filled with parallel lives and cups of strong coffee. Their nights, though shared, held different dreams.

And in Viren’s mind, somewhere between the laughter and the loneliness, the memory of Ritu remained—sharp as glass, soft as a wound never allowed to heal.

But Sushima stayed. Not because he loved her the most.

But perhaps, because she was the only one who never asked him **to be someone he wasn’t.**

Radiance beneath the Shadows



Weeks bled into months.

Delhi's Winter passed, and with it, the dust from Viren's soul slowly began to settle, but never fully. Some parts of heartbreak don't **erode with time; they harden, like fossils beneath the skin.**

Life with Sushima was, in many ways, beautiful. Predictable. Peaceful.

On Sundays, they went to the farmers' market near Lakshmi Nagar, picking out fresh basil and overpriced avocados. On lazy afternoons, they watched old Bengali films on her laptop, Sushima translating the metaphors with whispered explanations. She filled the apartment with life, tiny potted plants on the windowsill, flowers in the bathroom, and turmeric milk before bed.

She was, in every way, a good woman. And Viren, despite his fractured heart, tried to be a good man.

They made love often, but without urgency. Sushima was patient, exploratory, and sensitive. She loved like a deep river, steady, without expectations, without drama.

But no matter how tenderly she touched him, Viren's mind played old reels: the way Ritu once gasped his name, the way she used to bite her lower lip before kissing him, the fire in her eyes when she fought, the

softness in her arms afterward. The wildness in her voice when she used to send her seductive pictures to him just to keep his attention span rolling till he actually kissed her.

Sometimes, in the dark, he whispered Ritu's name under his breath, barely audible. Once, Sushima stirred. He thought she hadn't heard.

But she had.

One evening, it all cracked **abruptly yet quietly**.

Sushima had made rajma chawal, his comfort food. The table was laid. Soft jazz played in the background.

He didn't touch the food.

"I saw her in your journal," she said calmly, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. "Page forty-eight. You wrote: **'Even when I kiss her, my lips remember the weight of Ritu's goodbye.'**"

He didn't defend himself. Just lowered his eyes.

"I'm not angry," she said. "But I deserve to be more than a stand-in for your memories."

Her voice didn't tremble. That's what made it worse. "You're not a stand-in," Viren whispered. "Then what am I?" she asked, not unkindly. "Because you're in bed with me, but dreaming of her. You wake up saying her name. You hold me... but you ache for someone who walked away."

Viren reached for her hand. She let him.

"I'm trying," he said. "God knows, I'm trying to forget her."

Sushima looked at him for a long time. Then, softly:

"I never asked you to forget. I just wanted to be remembered, too."

That night, they slept apart for the first time in weeks.

The bed felt too large. The silence was too loud.

Viren sat on the floor by the window, staring out at the blinking skyline. Rain tapped against the glass like a lullaby that refused to soothe.

He thought of Ritu, where she might be, whether she ever thought of him, whether she regretted the slap or stood by it.

But mostly, he thought of Sushima. The woman who had moved into his cracked life without trying to fix him. The woman who asked for nothing and perhaps deserved everything.

The next morning, she was still there.

She made tea, folded his socks, and left a sticky note on the fridge: "Don't skip breakfast. I'll be late leaving the office."

No accusations. No melodrama. Just love. Quiet. Undemanding.

And yet, all Viren could feel... was the loud absence of something else.

Or someone.

A Love Divided- An Ethered Soul



The apartment felt warmer now, not because of the sun pouring through the windows but because Sushima had filled it with a kind of invisible warmth that Viren couldn't describe. It clung to the cushions she fluffed every morning, the playlist she updated each Sunday, the scent of her rose oil on the pillows.

But inside Viren?

There was weather he couldn't name, neither storm, nor calm. **Just a fog of longing and guilt.**

Every smile he offered Sushima was half-earned. Every hug felt like both a promise and a betrayal.

He took longer showers these days.

Not for the water. But for the stillness. It was the only place where no one asked anything of him. He would stand under the jet stream, eyes closed, and picture Ritu at the airport, her earrings dancing in defiance, her eyes ablaze, and that slap, that unforgettable slap that hurt far less than the silence she left behind.

She hadn't called. Not once.

Hadn't unblocked him.

Hadn't even acknowledged that he existed in a city of seventeen million people.

And still, she occupied him. Fully. Unfairly.

One night, he opened her old text messages.

They were still saved years of conversations, emojis, voice notes, arguments, and reconciliations. He scrolled to one from a year ago:

"Love isn't a place we visit, Viren. It's the place we return to, again and again, even after the doors are closed."

He stared at that message for an eternity. Then deleted it.

He felt nothing but a vacuum.

The next day, he took a walk without his phone.

No music. No distractions. Just the rhythm of his own footsteps.

In the Garden, he sat on a bench where he and Ritu once argued over biryani vs sushi. He smiled at the memory, then winced at the aftertaste.

He watched a couple jog past. Their hands touched between strides. Effortlessly.

Why did his love always come with effort?

That night, Sushima returned late.

She didn't ask where he'd been. She never did.

But this time, Viren spoke first.

"Do you think... love should be simple?" he asked.

Sushima took off her earrings, placed them on the dresser.

"No. I think it should be honest."

He nodded slowly. "And if it's not?"

"Then it becomes memory," she replied, without looking at him. "Not love."

Her words sat between them like a quiet third presence in the room.

The next morning, Viren packed a small bag.

Just two shirts, his laptop, and a notebook.

He looked at Sushima as she made toast.

"I need a few days," he said. "To go away. Be alone. Figure out what I really feel... and who I feel it for."

She didn't stop him. Didn't cry.

She only said, **"Just don't come back out of guilt. Come back because you finally saw me."**

He left for Rishikesh that evening.

Not to chase Ritu. Not yet.

But to chase himself. The version he had lost in all this-between one woman who left him burning, and another who tried to hold the ashes without getting burned herself.

Silence by the Ganga



Rishikesh welcomed him with mist and the hum of prayer bells. The river moved like time slowed, relentless, unforgiving. It didn't pause for anyone's heartbreak. It simply flowed, and in that flow, Viren found a rhythm quieter than his thoughts.

He checked into a small ashram-style guesthouse near the Laxman Jhula. No TV. No Wi-Fi. Just a fan, a thin mattress, and the echo of his own breathing. Each morning began with walks along the ghats and ended with a notebook on his lap.

For the first time in months, he didn't talk. Didn't utter a word sometime during the whole day.

He listened to the river, to the wind, to the questions he had avoided.

Day Four.

The rain poured gently on the tin roof. Viren sat cross-legged by the window, a cup of lemon tea beside him. He opened his notebook to a blank page. And without planning to, he began writing to Sushima.

Not for apology.

Not for assurance.

But for honesty.

Dear **Sushima**,

It's raining here. Not the stormy kind, just soft sheets falling like silk. The Ganga is full, alive, unbothered by people like me who sit on her banks, hoping to understand what can't be said out loud.

You were absolutely correct when you said, you deserve to know the truth, not the edited version I've been offering in glances and half-words.

I came here to find peace. I thought I was looking for clarity. But what I'm really facing is myself, and he's not as kind as I thought.

I don't know if I love you, Sushima.

There. I said it.

I care for you. Deeply. I admire you. I am grateful to you. You're the safest place I've ever known. But every time you touch me, I feel a shadow. Not because your touch lacks love, but because my heart is not fully here.

That's not your fault. It's mine.

It's still wrapped around someone who left long ago, and I hate that. I hate that she lives inside my ribs like an echo chamber. I hate that I compare every small happiness with her ghost. I hate that I let you love me while being half-available. I have read somewhere about the replacement theory, but I don't know why it could never make sense in my case. Why couldn't anyone replace her? Why couldn't you replace her when all I am seeing is only unconditional love given by you to me always..... My handkerchiefs are still stained by her kajal and her

lipbalm Sushima... Where do I accommodate you? I can still smell her (not her perfume), the earthy, raw smell of her when her sweat drops from her forehead due to the excessive energy roll she puts in playing Linkin Park!!!

You walked into my wreckage, Sushima, not asking for a return. Just offering warmth. That's a kind of bravery I don't deserve.

You've never asked me to choose. But I've come here to do exactly that. To stop floating between memories and moments.

I don't know if I'll return with answers. But I promise this: when I am ready, I will not return a man divided.

If I come back to you, it will be because I want to, with all my pieces aligned, not as a man still haunted by a woman who is no longer mine.

If I don't come back... please remember that you were **never second. You were my shelter.**

And sometimes, shelter is the one thing a man takes for granted until the storm ends.

— Viren

He folded the letter but didn't post it. Not yet.

Instead, he tucked it under his pillow and lay back, eyes on the wooden ceiling, as the rain whispered its truths into the quiet.

He would have read his own letter at least 10 times before posting it.. not because he was sceptical of writing something wrong, he read it just to replay in his mind too.

And the next morning, when he woke up, a sudden flow
of thoughts forced him to open his diary and write
something –

Oh, my dear Distance of almost 500 Miles!

Thou shalt not just sit there quietly.

For what you have taken away from me

Was the smile I wear and the peace I carry.

Oh, my dear Distance of almost 500 Miles!

Don't you dare forget to feed her right,

Thou art not in love with her and

I know, she eats less when she's out of my sight.

Oh, my dear Distance of almost 500 Miles!

Thou shalt hold her hand in the moment of phosphine

She is not like many and

In comparison to the crowd, she prefers to quarantine.

Oh, my dear Distance of almost 500 Miles!

Thou shalt also hug her once in a while

She wouldn't say much, but I know

She gets lonely without me standing by her side.

Oh, my dear Distance of almost 500 Miles!
Thou shalt not get arrogant for not letting us sway
I agree on the trachea malfunction u caused
But the most torturous distance between us is
When she hugs me and
Oblivious I am
I still keep her some inches away!!

And suddenly, he realised this time in his forever
memory, he wrote a poem which was not for Ritu but for
Sushima.....

Bruises Beneath Silk



The Ganga Aarti that evening was unusually crowded.

A cultural event was underway—an elite gathering hosted by a Delhi-based political foundation at the Rishikesh riverbank. Dignitaries in silk kurtas and chiffon sarees, spiritual leaders, camera crews. Viren had stumbled into the edge of the crowd, drawn by the chanting, the fire bowls, the resonance of conch shells cutting through the twilight air.

And then, without warning, his breath caught mid-chest.

There she was.

Ritu.

Standing beside her husband, MLA Sandeep Thakur, his back ramrod straight, his expression carved in entitlement. But Ritu...

She looked different. The elegance was still there, an off-white saree draped perfectly, her neck adorned with a minimalist string of pearls. But her spirit... it was no longer upright. Her body moved, yes, but like a marionette. Robotic. Hollow. She was limping. Barely noticeable to a stranger, but obvious to someone who once danced with her on rooftops at midnight. Her right ear was bandaged crudely with gauze, hidden poorly beneath her hair. Viren's eyes caught the deep purple

shadows beneath her makeup, the tremble in her lower lip. And Viren noticed all this from being so far away, thanks to his iPhone zoom-in feature. Imagine how much he could have seen if he were near her somewhere!!!

She followed her husband like a shadow, her eyes fixed on the ground, never straying more than an arm's length from him. Her left hand gripped her pallu as if it anchored her to reality.

Viren stood frozen.

He didn't breathe. Didn't blink.

Their eyes met.

For a second. Maybe less.

No words. No flinching. No acknowledgment.

Just a flash of unbearable recognition.

She looked away first, quickly, shamefully. Not because she hated him. But because she couldn't bear to be seen.

And that broke Viren more than any slap ever could.

He didn't move for the next ten minutes.

The ceremony continued—holy chants echoed across the river, lamps floated downstream in hypnotic spirals. People clapped, took selfies, bowed their heads.

But all Viren could see was **that bandage. That limp.**

That beautiful woman, **once fierce and untamed, now reduced to silence.**

He wanted to scream. To run to her. To drag her away. To ask what had happened to the fire in her eyes.

But he did nothing.

Because in that one second of eye contact, he understood she wasn't allowed to ask for help. She wasn't ready to be rescued. Not yet.

And worse, she was too ashamed to let him witness what had become of her.

That night, Viren didn't return to his guesthouse.

He wandered along the banks, rage and heartbreak clashing like tides inside him.

He wanted to punch something. To cry. To call her name into the river and hope the water could carry his pain to wherever she was hiding her own.

But mostly, he just wanted to hold her. Not as a lover. But as someone **who once knew her when she was alive.** Back in his room, he sat with his journal open, the old letter to Sushima still untouched under his pillow.

He didn't write a new letter that night.

There were no words.

Only a heavy, gnawing ache that told him one truth:

Ritu wasn't gone.

She was lost.

And now, so was he.

Two Rivers: Echoes on the opposite Banks



The next morning, the sky above Rishikesh was painted in ash and gold. The kind of morning where silence weighed more than speech. Viren hadn't slept. The image of Ritu's bandaged ear kept replaying like a curse. Her limp. Her eyes lowered. Her spirit was crushed.

He knew it. Sandeep must have again hit her.

The idea clawed at him.

At 10:23 a.m., he walked to the hotel where the event guests were staying at an exclusive riverside retreat. He didn't go inside. Just sat at the tea stall across the road, waiting.

He didn't know what he was waiting for.

Redemption?

A glance?

A moment when she would come out alone?

Instead, after an hour, he scribbled a note on a page torn from his notebook:

"I saw you yesterday. You don't have to be afraid of me. Or ashamed. If you need help, just blink twice when you see me. You're not alone. I swear you're not."

He folded the paper and wrote her name on it. Just her name.

RITU.

He handed it to a young boy selling flowers outside and pointed to the lobby. "Give this to the lady with the white saree and pearls. But only if she's alone. Understand?"

The boy nodded with the solemnity of a spy.

Viren didn't stay to see what happened. He couldn't.

He walked away, his heart thudding like a prison gate.

In a different metaverse in Delhi, Sushima was still living in the apartment of Viren.

Five days after Viren had left, a courier arrived at the apartment.

It was the letter. The one Viren had written from Rishikesh. Sealed. Neatly addressed. No frills. Just her name and the flat number.

Sushima read it alone.

She didn't cry while reading.

She cried after.

Because it confirmed what she had always feared: he wanted to love her, but he couldn't. His loyalty was present. His body was present. But his heart lived in another time zone.

Still, the letter was honest. Brutally so.

She respected that.

Later that evening, she sat on the floor of their shared living room, surrounded by the plants she had nurtured, the books she had rearranged, the cushions she had picked with care.

It wasn't hers anymore.

It never truly was.

Back in Rishikesh...

The boy returned. "Sir, she took it," he whispered.

Viren's heart skipped. "She read it?"

The boy shook his head. "She didn't open it. Just... held it. And then she got into a car with that man again."

"Did she... say anything?"

The boy hesitated. "She looked like she was crying. Quietly. She kept the note in her fist. Tight."

Viren closed his eyes.

Sometimes, even the smallest hope feels like a storm.

Back in Delhi.....

That night, Sushima left the apartment key on the kitchen counter.

She didn't leave a letter. Or a dramatic goodbye.

Just a note on the fridge:

"Thank you for trying. That's more than what most people offer.

Be well. S."

Both the women drifted away from Viren one by choice, the other by circumstance.

And Viren? He stands still, between two rivers, neither of which will carry him to shore.

The Woman Behind the Silent Veil



The car smelled of power. Leather seats. Expensive perfume. The faint metallic stench of blood, dried and forgotten like so many other bruises under her saree.

Ritu sat perfectly still, her hands folded in her lap, the note from Viren clenched tightly inside her fist. She hadn't dared open it. But she hadn't thrown it away either.

She had learned **how to hold on to things that hurt.**

Her right ear still throbbed from the earring incident two nights ago. She had told the media it was an allergy. Told her staff she slipped in the bathroom. Told herself it was her fault.

Maybe she had rolled her eyes too hard.

Maybe she had walked too slowly behind her husband.

Maybe she had smiled at someone longer than two seconds.

He said Men notice. That he had a reputation to protect. That if she ever embarrassed him again..... She didn't let her mind finish that sentence anymore.

But Viren's handwriting had **wrecked her.**

Just seeing her name in his crooked, familiar script had unlocked a part of her she had chained long ago.

He saw me.

Not the public figure.

Not the puppet wife.

Me.

The girl who once danced barefoot at India Gate. The one who drank Old Monk from a paper cup on her birthday. The one who used to cry into Viren's hoodie during her exams as she had missed one or two lines in the answer!!

That girl wasn't dead.

She was hiding. And now... she had been found.

In her hotel room, she waited until her husband left for a late dinner meeting. Then she sat on the bathroom floor, back against the cold marble wall, and finally opened the note.

"You don't have to be afraid of me. Or ashamed.

If you need help, just blink twice when you see me.

You're not alone. I swear you're not."

She read it four times.

And then she did something she hadn't done in months.

She sobbed.

Not the elegant, restrained kind of crying her PR team could spin. But raw, guttural grief that made her cough and shake. Her palm pressed over her mouth so no one outside could hear. Because she didn't want to be seen. Not like this. Not until she was strong enough again.

Later, she placed the note inside her book, the one Viren had gifted her years ago: **The Fountainhead**. He used to say she was like Dominique Francon, complicated, misunderstood, yet unapologetically herself.

She looked into the mirror.

No, she wasn't Dominique anymore.

She was just... a woman surviving.

She whispered to her reflection, "**He still sees me.**"

And that gave her enough courage to not sleep with her phone under her pillow for once. To not flinch when someone knocked. To believe just barely that maybe someday, escape wouldn't be betrayal.

The First Door towards Salvation



There was no sudden epiphany.

No lightning strike.

No movie-like moment where Ritu declared, "I'm leaving you!"

It began with smaller choices. Ones that didn't even look like rebellion.

She started locking the door of her bedroom.

Not because she feared Sandeep would barge in. But because privacy was the first brick in the wall she was rebuilding.

She needed a space where her breathing belonged to her.

She'd sit on the edge of the bathtub and whisper Viren's note like a mantra.

"You're not alone."

Not anymore.

She started saving cash.

Each time she went to the market with her assistant or paid for temple offerings in cash, she saved all that she could. Small denominations, even in 100s. Folded them into a forgotten cloth pouch and tucked it inside a hollow box of cotton swabs in her vanity.

She wasn't sure yet where she'd go. But she knew that leaving required currency. And courage.

She had to build both.

She began saying 'no' more often.

"No, I won't wear red tomorrow."

"No, I'd rather not sit in the front row."

"No, I already have plans."

Each "no" was a whisper of her old self crawling back.

Her husband didn't react violently to these first few refusals. He was smug. Unbothered. He still believed her resistance was temporary. Like a cold. Like grief. He had no idea she was preparing to vanish.

She reached out quietly. One morning, while Sandeep was in a meeting downstairs, Ritu called her old college roommate Anuja. A lawyer now. Married. Sensible. Trustworthy.

"Hi," Ritu said, voice tight. "I'm just checking in. Been a while."

It was a three-minute call. But Anuja's voice carried warmth, surprise, and worry. Ritu said nothing alarming. But at the end of the call, she said, "I may need you someday. Just... know that."

And Anuja replied, without hesitation, "I already do."

She began writing again.

At night, in a notebook hidden inside the lining of her suitcase, she wrote letters to herself.

Some were angry. Some apologetic. Some terrified.

But all were real.

And for a woman whose life had become a performance, truth was now her only form of rebellion.

One evening, while flipping through *The Fountainhead*, she found **Viren's old note again.**

She touched the edge with reverence.

If you need help, just blink twice when you see me.

She smiled bitterly.

She had already blinked twice that day on the ghat.

She wondered if he had noticed.

And then one day... she packed a single bag.

Not to run. Not yet. But just to know she could.

Inside it: A set of salwar suits, her passport, A photograph of her parents, and an old key to her father's closed-down bookshop in Rohtak. The pouch of saved cash and Viren's note.

She placed the bag behind the bathroom geyser, wrapped in a shawl.

Her version of a fire escape.

Ritu was not free yet.

But she was no longer fully caged either.

And that, for now, was enough.

The Last Straw: When Tolerance ran out of Euphony



She should have hidden the bag better.

The cotton shawl she had wrapped it in had slipped slightly from behind the geyser. It was just enough for Sandeep to notice something out of place when he entered the bathroom unexpectedly that morning.

By the time she came out of the shower, he was standing there, her escape bag wide open on the bed, her clothes and passport splayed out like evidence.

His face was calm. Too calm.

“Planning a trip?” he asked, his voice coated in sugar and venom.

Ritu froze.

And then it happened.

Without a warning, without a word, the slap came first. So loud, she heard the echo before she felt the sting.

And then the second. The third. The fourth.

She stumbled, tried to crawl backward, but he dragged her by the hair into the corner of the room and rained down fists like a man possessed.

Her ribs felt like they cracked. Her lip split open. The skin under her eye swelled like a balloon.

She screamed. Cried. Begged.

But no one came.

The servants had learned to ignore the noise.

The guards were loyal to his wallet.

The walls of power were thick with silence.

Then he did something that broke her more than his fists.

He took photos.

On his phone. As she lay curled in pain, her face swollen, her arm bleeding from the corner of the cupboard.

He clicked them.

One by one.

And then, with the smirk of a sadist, he sent them to her on WhatsApp.

"This is the real Ritu Sharma. A broken woman. Body and spirit. Let the world see what she hides under her sarees."

Ritu didn't speak for two days.

She stayed in her room, eyes swollen shut, body trembling with fever, her soul sinking into shame. But something in her, something that had been fragile, delicate, feminine snapped.

And in its place, something else was born.

Steel.

On the third day, she stood in front of her full-length mirror, bruised, black-and-blue, and stared hard.

She whispered to herself:

“You are not broken. You are waking up.”

Then she walked into the guest bedroom. Cleaned it. Moved her clothes in. Shut the door.

And locked it. She didn't ask for permission. She didn't cry. She shifted her centre of gravity.

That night, when Sandeep knocked once, then banged, then shouted, she stayed silent.

He didn't hit her again for the next month. Because now, she had stopped reacting. And that scared him more than her screaming ever did. She started attending every social function, cultural event, book reading, and charity fundraiser anywhere he wasn't.

The city saw her everywhere.

In white cotton kurtas with dark glasses to cover her face. In panel discussions about women's safety, even as her bruises throbbed underneath. She smiled for the cameras. Gave articulate answers. And silently, she was documenting everything. Her injuries. His messages. Her medical reports. Her movements.

Each outing, each breath of independence, was evidence.

Not just for court. But for herself.

She no longer believed she would be rescued.

She would escape.

On her own.

On her terms.

When she wants to go !!

The Shift: Pendulum of Consciousness



Rishikesh had always felt like a temporary sanctuary, a place where time slowed down and grief could breathe a little. For Viren, the ten days spent in the city of saints had been more than a break from his fast-paced Delhi life; it had been a reckoning. The Ganga flowed with an eternal calm, as if it knew too well the restlessness that plagued human hearts. And in those days, as he roamed the ghats or sat silently beneath the twilight skies, it was Ritu's haunted eyes that returned to him, again and again.

He had never seen her like that, shattered, her silence screaming louder than her words ever could. The woman who once lit up rooms with her laughter now sat wrapped in shadows, her grief too heavy for even her delicate frame to carry. And Viren, helpless yet moved, could no longer deny what his heart whispered he had to be near her. Not for closure, not to rekindle what was lost, but to simply be there... in case she ever needed him.

So, the decision was made. Central Delhi would be his home. He could work remotely for now, and later, find something more permanent. But what tugged at the corners of his decision was not just Ritu. There was another thread left tangled, Sushima.

Ah, Sushima.

She had never demanded anything from him. She had loved him quietly, wholly, and without conditions. No melodrama, no ultimatums. Just presence. Steady, gentle, unwavering. Leaving North meant confronting the truth he had long postponed.

When he returned to the city to wrap things up, an unexpected discovery awaited him. His mother, Maya, was staying with Sushima. The news of a minor heart attack had been carefully kept from him. Sushima had convinced Maya not to live alone and brought her to stay at her place. What surprised Viren even more was the way the two women had bonded. They were like old friends, chatting over tea, watching serials late into the night, laughing about things he couldn't quite follow. They even shared the master bedroom, relegating him to the guest room. At first, it amused him. Then, it humbled him.

That night, as he lay with **Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment** open on his chest, pondering the ideas of **guilt, redemption, and suffering**, he heard the softest sound—his name. "Viren..."

It was barely a whisper.

He sprang from bed and rushed to the bedroom, but Maya was not there. A chill ran through him. The next moment, he found her collapsed on the kitchen floor, the kettle hissing on the stove behind her.

"Sushima!" he shouted, panic clawing at his throat.
"Please help!"

Sushima came running, barefoot and breathless. Together, they got Maya into the car and to the hospital.

Hours passed like molasses in the stark-white corridors of the ICU. At dawn, Sushima had a crucial board meeting. Viren insisted she leave and rest, though her eyes were torn with worry. She squeezed his hand once before leaving, wordless.

Later, when the sun filtered into the hospital room through pale blinds, Maya opened her eyes. Her voice was faint, but her gaze was steady.

“Viren...”

“I’m here, Ma,” he said, leaning closer.

She took a long breath and smiled. “Beta... It’s time you must stop looking behind.”

He nodded slowly, uncertain of her meaning. “You must settle down,” she continued. “With someone who stands by you. Who loves you even when you don’t know how to return it.”

His eyes misted. She touched his hand.

“In life, we must try to value those who love us... more than those whom we love. **Love that only provides without any greed for getting in return is rare.** Sushima... she’s rare.”

He couldn’t speak. He only held her hand tighter.

Outside, the sun rose on a city that never paused. But inside, something within Viren finally shifted, not an

answer, but a clarity that only life's rawest moments could deliver.

Rishikesh had helped him see. But it was in Delhi, by his mother's hospital bed, that he understood.

Still unsure about the institution of marriage Viren declared to the girls in her home that he would marry Sushima next year, and till then, they both can explore the best and worst of each other.

Sand leaving the Palm!



Viren got up in the morning and, as usual, crawled his hand inside his pillow where he generally keeps his mobile and, with one open and one closed eye, checked notifications. There were 3 emails on his Outlook, one was from his boss to enquire about the current project. He is such an ass I had explained everything in epic detail on Thursday evening, yet he marked me an email with cc to super bosses highlighting my incompetence to complete the project in the tight timelines. The second email was from Shruti, a newly recruited intern under one of his teammates Kapil, just to prove the work she had marked Viren in cc while marking the weekly progress email to her reporting manager Kapil, these youngsters are getting way too smart these days, murmured Viren and checked the third unread mail of his mailbox- the mail from the Accounts department which read last reminder to the defaulters who have not yet submitted tax declaration related documents, damn I again forgot Viren almost felt angry with himself and put his duvet off his body. The iconic pink duvet of Sushima, which Viren almost begged from her as he wanted to feel the presence of Sushima with him while he slept every night.

Touching his duvet, Viren realized there was no good morning text or call from Sushima on his mobile that morning. For the past two years, he was so used to seeing

her message first thing in the morning on his mobile. Opened his WhatsApp and Bloody Hell, Sushima had blocked me, Viren shouted in disgust and shock, how could she block me? so what we fought last night, I mean, isn't a fight a normal thing between us? He was staggering and dialled her number, it rang only once, and then the number came busy, what the hell. He again dialled and again the same thing, he dialled and again the same..... It was only then that he realized he was blocked on calls as well. He went to Instagram and opened her profile, and damn, he was blocked there also. Sushima blocked him on Instagram, the same Sushima who used to put her pic with him on each of her "stories for close friends". Same Sushima who had tagged him in almost twenty of her pics on her Instagram account, he got sad thinking and suddenly he developed a strange urge to see Sushima's face, and he opened his profile and started to browse his pics, he was trying to find the pictures in which Sushima was there and then he realized those pics were also deleted. Oh, she has my password she must have deleted them. That was the moment Viren could hear the loud voice of Vishal and Manik laughing at him when he told them that his passwords were with Sushima also. Viren opened LinkedIn as he was sure that at least Sushima wouldn't be so unprofessional that she would have blocked him there, but to his surprise, Sushima had also blocked him there. Now this was unusual for Viren. **He got very sad, angry, irritated, hopeless, insulted, and many more, almost at the same time.**

There is a moment in life when you aren't sad or angry or upset, but you are confused, and something seems heavy

on your chest, and you suddenly feel like you have trouble breathing when you have a normal breath. Viren was confused. In absolute zero moments of truth, he had lost almost everything he used to boast as his, his Sushima. The gal who brought happiness to his face in almost all impossible moments. He was trying hard to remember each detail of the fight they had last night and was almost dissecting each moment in the minutest details to know what exactly was grave enough to let Sushima go out of his life.

It's a crazy ride, what we call life. It hits hard the moment when we expect it in its best chunks. But most of the time in life, we live in denial; we just can't accept what's happening when it's happening. Newton's theory of relativity was perhaps too correct concerning life, and mainly in case of any sudden grief when it strikes.

Viren felt an urgent need to go to the washroom; his bladder was bursting with the morning rush, and he was just unable to get up. Shefali must have known why Sushima had blocked me, so he hurriedly found Shefali's contact card and dialled the number. People say that sometimes the entire universe conspires against you; it seemed to be one of those days for Viren. Shefali's phone was off, and she had stopped seeing her WhatsApp from 2 am last night.

Boom, here he realised, he and Sushima fought at 12:30 AM, and so Sushima, after getting angry and blocking him, must have gone to Shefali's flat, and hence she's with her. Immediately, he got up to pee and hurriedly came out, then thought that if he must go back and at least wash

his hands the moment he would meet Sushima, he would hold her hands after all and kiss her forehead. Kiss, ah, he has realized he must brush his teeth also, after all, for how long Sushima can hold herself angry in 10-15 mins of his apologies, she would give up and smile ear to ear, the same smile he adored when he saw her in the office corridor. Damn she was wearing a pink salwar kameez with a fine white Dupatta and pearl earrings..... this also reminded Viren that the first reason why they started fighting was when Sushima asked Viren how she was looking in Vishal's party last week, and he couldn't recall her outfit. I am such a duffer. Viren cursed himself, and instantly a portion of toothpaste froth fell over his t-shirt... He now had to change his t-shirt also obviously he couldn't go and meet Shefali with a froth-stained t-shirt. But I'm going for Sushima, not Shefali, still, basic hygiene is required, oh gosh, hygiene.....

Viren thought he must change his underwear also after all the fourth law of Newton is that the last drop of your piss would fall on your underwear ... such a swine you are, Viren, Sushima had blocked u, she had left you, and you are looking forward to a chance just in case.....

The function of the human brain is so damn complex, it keeps working nonstop, and the dialogue with oneself is also always ongoing. Viren hurriedly changed his clothes, put on his favourite perfume, and was almost ready to leave his flat. Suddenly, he realized his phone was at 1% charge, so he had to stay for some time to charge his phone. He put his mobile on charge and thought of making tea for himself in the borrowed time interval.

There was Viren, still in an abstract state of mind making his favourite ginger cardamom tea with one full spoon of tea leaves and almost negligible sugar. He loves his morning tea as he feels morning shows the day, and it was good that the phone was discharged and he got some time with his tea. Tea-making is also an art. Viren was talking to himself in his mind. Sushima used to always overboil or underboil tea, and there is nothing as criminal as having a bad bed tea. How swiftly Viren said "Sushima Used to", this is absurd, Viren, Sushima had just blocked u for a night and u are already mentioning her in the past tense.

Viren got so disgusted with himself and quickly got up and checked his phone; it was 28% charged now, so he took it and left for Shefali's house.

Silent Conversations: Communion in Stillness



Viren stood outside the gate, unsure if he should ring the bell or just turn around. The evening was unusually quiet for a summer day in Delhi, except for the distant honking of autos and the low hum of a neighbour's TV playing some tired soap. He hesitated, looking up at the nameplate: **Shefali Manas Khurana**. A pang of anxiety ran through him, but he finally pressed the bell.

Shefali opened the door in a second, her face brightening in surprise. "Oh! Viren!" she exclaimed, stepping aside to let him in. "What a surprise. Come in!"

Inside, the air smelled of lavender and freshly brewed coffee. The living room was warm and lit in soft yellow hues. Sushima was there, lounging on the couch in an oversized t-shirt and socks, cradling a cup of coffee like it was her only defence against the world.

Viren's eyes met hers, and though her lips curled into a faint, polite smile, her eyes... they were a battlefield. No words left her mouth, but those deep brown eyes, sharp as glass, burned into his with unspoken rage, sorrow, and something even heavier: disappointment.

"Hey," he said, unsure if he should say more.

"Hey," she replied coolly.

"Coffee?" Shefali asked him.

"Uh, yeah. Sure. Thanks."

They made small talk movies, someone's wedding, and Shefali's new cat. On the surface, it was normal, even pleasant. But Viren felt like he was sitting in the eye of a storm. Sushima barely spoke directly to him. When she did, it was brief, almost clinical. Yet every glance she threw his way was loaded with meaning, like a silent film being played behind her eyes. Hurt. Betrayal. Distance. All playing without sound, but it felt loud in his chest.

He noticed the subtle things. Her hands trembled slightly as she refilled her cup. Her smile didn't reach her eyes. Her laughter, when Shefali cracked a joke, was delayed and hollow. Every time he tried to meet her gaze, it lingered for a second longer than it should have, as if she was trying to pierce through him but not let him in.

After about thirty minutes, Viren stood up.

"I should get going," he said, brushing invisible lint off his jeans. He paused. "Sushima... do you want to come too?"

She didn't look at him at first. She sipped her tea, still gazing at the floor, then softly said, "I'll stay with Shefali tonight."

He nodded, masking the sinking feeling with a tight smile. "Okay then."

As he stepped toward the door, he turned and said, "Can I... borrow a minute?"

Shefali took the cue and walked into the kitchen.

In the stillness that followed, Viren and Sushima stood inches apart in the hallway. He searched her face for some trace of softness, of what they used to be just days ago.

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

She didn't flinch, didn't even blink. "Unblock me," he added, hoping for a moment of reconciliation, a thread to pull them back together.

Sushima looked at him, finally, directly and said, "After 72 hours."

"What? What the hell does that even mean? 72 hours? Why not now?" he asked, frustration flashing through his voice.

She gave a half-smile, sad but composed. **"Because sometimes pain needs space. And silence too."**

He didn't argue. What would be the point? He nodded, jaw clenched, and left. The control freak in Viren was feeling so defeated.

Back at his flat, the silence was deafening. Every corner, every object, mocked him. The half-used bottle of her favorite body mist. The cushion she always cuddled. The balcony where they'd sat watching rain with shared headphones. Everything reminded him of her.

He couldn't bear it.

Without thinking much, he changed, grabbed his laptop bag, and rushed out. Work, even with all its demands, seemed like the only place where his mind wouldn't echo with memories of her.

But even as he left the building, her eyes followed him, silent, angry, broken.

Mask of Civility, Heart of Darkness



The flashbulbs popped like tiny fireworks outside the MLA bungalow as Sandeep Thakur stepped out onto the red carpet rolled across the stone driveway. Dressed in a pristine white kurta-pyjama with a Nehru jacket, he smiled with the ease of a man used to applause. Cameras turned eagerly toward him, reporters jostling for a soundbite.

And just two steps behind him, Ritu walked silently, her saree pleated to perfection, a tiny bindi anchoring her expressionless face. She nodded politely at the cameras but avoided their eyes. Her role was well-rehearsed, silent grace, dutiful presence, never a shadow out of place.

She had learned long ago that smiling too brightly or speaking out of turn triggered quiet punishments. And sometimes not so quiet.

Inside, the air was still heavy with the fragrance of incense and polished wood. Ritu stood beside the flower vase in the foyer, listening to the muffled sound of praise being heaped upon her husband by party workers in the living room.

"A born leader," said one.

"Future cabinet material," said another.

She quietly moved up the staircase, her feet light on the marble. The heels of her sandals had long been replaced by silent rubber soles.

In their bedroom—an opulent blend of gold silk and dark wood—she removed her dupatta and looked at her reflection. Underneath the powder, the bruises on her collarbone had begun to turn yellow. They were healing. The old ones always did. Until the new ones arrived.

She sat down at the vanity and opened the small locked drawer beneath it. Inside, carefully wrapped in tissue paper, lay a small digital recorder. She hadn't used it yet. Just owning it made her feel like she was trespassing into forbidden territory.

The door banged open behind her.

"What the hell was that?" Sandeep's voice had a dangerous softness to it. The kind that warned of the storm behind it.

Ritu stood up instinctively. "What?"

"In the car. You looked away when that journalist asked about the welfare project. You made me look weak."

"I.....I didn't mean....."

His hand struck the edge of the dressing table as he leaned closer. His breath smelled of paan and anger. "Do you think I care what you meant? I tell you to smile. You smile. I tell you to speak. You speak. That's your job."

She nodded, barely breathing. Her hand had slipped into the drawer instinctively, fingers brushing the recorder. She clicked it on, silently, behind her back.

“You don’t belong to them. You belong to me. Don’t ever forget that.”

She flinched as he grabbed her wrist. For a second, the pain made her gasp. Then came the apology he would never say. Instead, he tossed her hand aside and walked out, muttering, “Ungrateful. All of you.” And while going out of the room, he threw his shoe at Ritu. His shoe had hurt Ritu’s face as it came tossing all over, perfectly aimed.

The door slammed again.

She stood frozen for a long time, her breathing uneven, the recorder still in her hand. She didn’t cry. Not this time. The tears had dried long ago.

Instead, she pressed stop and stared at the device. Just minutes of rage. Ten minutes of truth. It was a beginning. Small, dangerous, vital.

She placed it back into the drawer and locked it.

Later, as the house quieted down and Sandeep drank himself to sleep, Ritu walked to the balcony. The city lights blinked in the distance, **Delhi, the capital of promises and power.** Somewhere out there, people believed in her husband. She had once, too.

Now, she believed in something else. **In silence broken. In truth recorded.**

Slowly and gradually, Ritu had recorded 17 incidents of the torture and misbehaviour of Sandeep.

And it was only the fifth year of her marriage.

Dots beginning to Connect



The late spring air in Delhi had begun to hum with the promise of summer, the whispers of breeze making the evenings softer, mellower. For Viren, however, the weather was only a mild backdrop to the emotional storm within.

It had been weeks since Sushima had left with Shefali. That morning, when Viren went to meet Sushima at Shefali's home, she hadn't said much while closing the door for him, just a soft "take care" and a faint smile, leaving behind a silence that grew louder with each passing hour.

At first, he had told himself it was temporary. But when days turned into weeks and he felt the emptiness settle in his bones, he realised something he had ignored for too long.

He missed her. Not just her presence, but her energy, her laughter, the way she organized his chaos without even trying. He missed the way she talked to his mother, Maya, how effortlessly the two of them bonded, discussing books, food, and the smallest details of life like old friends.

Sushima had never demanded anything from him. She had stayed by his side during his broken moments, his

confusion, his long silences. But her quiet exit had shown him the weight of her absence.

And then, there was Ritu.

It had been two years since that strange and abrupt airport confrontation in Delhi. The shock in her eyes, the disbelief in her husband's. A few sharp words, a quiet goodbye. And then nothing. She had blocked him, shut that door forever. There was no ambiguity left now, no possibility, no "what if". **Ritu was gone.**

For a long time, Viren had lived in that limbo, unwilling to move forward, yet unable to go back. But as he stood before the mirror one evening, staring at his own tired eyes, he saw something clearer than he had in years.

It was time to choose life.

And he knew who he wanted to share that life with.

The proposal wasn't extravagant. That wasn't Viren's style, nor Sushima's. He invited her to the garden café near Lodhi Garden, the one they used to visit after long walks, sipping cold coffee and laughing about everything and nothing.

She came in a pale-yellow saree, simple as always, but radiating warmth. When she saw him standing nervously near the table, something in her paused, perhaps a quiet recognition that this wasn't just another evening.

Viren didn't speak much. He held out a small ring box, his voice trembling slightly.

"Sushima, I don't want to lose you again. Will you marry me?"

Sushima blinked. For a second, her lips parted, but no words came. Then her face broke into the widest smile he had ever seen.

"Yes... Yes, Viren. A hundred times, yes."

To win over Sushima's conservative Bengali parents was another task entirely. But Viren, for the first time, wasn't hesitant. He met them in their Kolkata home, respectfully dressed, soft-spoken, and sincere. He promised them he would follow Bengali customs from "**Aiburo Bhaat**" to "**Shubho Bibaho**". Maya joined him in every meeting, charming them effortlessly, and soon, even the most sceptical uncle nodded in reluctant approval.

June 29 was chosen as **a date with a hint of monsoon and hope.**

The wedding was set to take place in Kolkata, in a grand yet traditional setup. There would be red and white "Sankha Pola, Alta-stained feet, and the fragrance of Shiuli flowers in the air". Maya had already started preparing her sarees and had invited half of Delhi.

As Viren stood in his room days before the ceremony, helping Maya finalize guest lists, he felt something he hadn't in years — peace. There was no lingering pain, no confusion, no guilt. Just clarity.

He looked out the window at the drizzle and smiled.

This time, he wasn't chasing a shadow.

This time, he was walking toward the light.

Towards Sushima.

Towards Home.

After a long time, he took out his Diary and wrote-

Thou shalt not sit in silence, my love

Let your words touch my soul,

The way you always gaze deep

From a small glance that u offer

Standing far away from me

Amidst the tens and hundreds of people

Thou shalt not stand in denial, my love

Let your presence illuminate my dark soul

The way you always accept me

In the deep darkness or bright stars

Just by being around

Giving extra breeze to my wings

Thou shalt not accept me half-heartedly, my love

For I can take your disagreement

The way you always accept to reject
In the herd of arguments that we do
Just through pauses
Assuring that we deserve much more

Thou shalt not leave me, my love
For I can do anything to make myself better
The way you let my imperfections breathe
In the light of bright sunlight
Just by walking by my side
Believing me to trust in
"The love that feels like love"!

A Quiet Kind of Forever



The monsoon came gently that year, as if the skies themselves wanted to bless the union. On June 29, under the soft glow of traditional Bengali lamps and amidst the fragrance of Shiuli and Sandalwood, Viren and Sushima were married. It was a wedding that carried no dramatic declarations or grandiose gestures, only quiet smiles, teary blessings, and two people choosing each other with open hearts.

Now, three months later, Viren often found himself pausing during the day, simply to take it all in. A mug of tea was left warm for him on his writing desk. The faint echo of Rabindra Sangeet from the kitchen. The way Sushima hummed when she watered the plants on the balcony every morning. These were not just habits; they were layers of a new life, rich and deep in their own unspoken language.

What surprised Viren most was how natural it all felt. After years of emotional drift and unresolved memories, being with Sushima was like stepping into a rhythm he didn't know he had been waiting for.

They shared everything: now space, silence, struggle, laughter.

There were late-night talks under the blanket about their childhood fears. Whispered dreams over weekend

coffees. They even fought, sometimes. Over books misplaced, grocery lists ignored, or how Viren left wet towels on the bed. But even their disagreements carried a strange warmth because the trust between them was unshakeable.

There was intimacy, yes, the kind that didn't always need touch or words. A hand held in sleep. A glance across the dinner table said, "I see you." A forehead kiss before leaving for work that lingered longer on hard days.

Their physical chemistry, too, was effortless. Nothing forced. Nothing contrived. Just a knowing, a comfort that came from deep affection. Sushima's laugh, muffled under the sheets, was now one of Viren's favourite sounds. And the way she rested her head on his chest after long days, it felt like the most natural conclusion to the day's story.

But beyond it all was the invisible thread that had strengthened over the years, from friendship to companionship to now, a deeper bond of love. Sushima understood his moods like the weather. She knew when he needed solitude and when he needed a nudge back into the world. She never pried into his past, but acknowledged it quietly, with the grace of someone who knew how long healing took.

Maya, too, was thriving. With Sushima in the house, their home had transformed. It was more alive—more colourful, even in the literal sense. Curtains had been changed, books reorganized, corners filled with tiny indoor plants. But more than that, it was the laughter of two women, his wife and his mother, talking about food,

poetry, and even politics, that made Viren feel deeply, finally, rooted.

One night, as rain tapped softly against the windows and the city hummed in the distance, Viren turned to Sushima, her head resting on his shoulder.

"I never thought I'd feel this settled," he whispered.

Sushima looked up, a sleepy smile playing on her lips.

"That's because you were busy looking for fire," she said, "and sometimes, **love is more like water it flows, it holds, and it stays.**"

Viren kissed her forehead gently.

"I'm glad I stopped running."

She closed her eyes, nestling closer.

"And I'm glad you turned around."

And so, in the quiet rhythm of shared days, between the everyday and the extraordinary, they built their own kind of forever, not loud, not perfect, but deeply, beautifully real.

The New Heartbeat



It was the last week of February, and Delhi had just begun to shed its winter skin. The air was still crisp in the mornings, but a golden warmth had started creeping into the afternoon, a sign that spring was near. The bougainvillea on their balcony had bloomed early this year, splashing their quiet corner of the city in hues of fuchsia and white.

Viren had always loved this time of year, but this February held something even more tender, more profound, something he hadn't yet seen coming.

Sushima had been sick for a few days. At first, it was just a lingering fatigue. Then the missed dates, the sudden food aversions, and the growing stillness in her that even she couldn't quite explain. It was Shefali, her old friend, who convinced her to take the test. She had waited. Not because of fear, but because she wanted the moment to be just right, just theirs.

On a quiet Sunday morning, with soft sunlight flooding their living room and the aroma of ginger chai wafting through the air, Sushima prepared a small tray. On it lay two cups of tea, a piece of "Shondesh" wrapped in silver foil, and a tiny white envelope with **"For Baba-to-be"** written in her elegant handwriting.

Viren was at his desk, poring over some old notes he was reworking for a new random forest algorithm for one of his clients' market research problems. He didn't notice her walk in at first, just the gentle clink of the tray on the coffee table.

"What's this?" he asked, looking up and stretching lazily.

Sushima smiled, her eyes dancing with a secret she could no longer hold.

"Just something sweet for a sweet morning."

Viren raised an eyebrow, picking up the envelope.

"You're not usually this poetic before tea," he joked.

"Open it," she said, her voice soft, but steady.

He tore it open gently. Inside was a small note in Sushima's handwriting:

"We're going to need three cups of tea soon."

"Baby arriving this Diwali."

Viren stared at the card, the meaning rushing in slower than his breath. His eyes lingered on the words again and again until they finally made sense.

He looked up, his eyes wide.

"Sush... Are you...?"

She nodded, tears already brimming in her eyes. **"Yes," she whispered. "Eight weeks."**

There was a pause, not of silence, but of overwhelming feeling, like the moment before the first rain touches dry earth. And then, Viren crossed the space between them in

a heartbeat, pulling her into an embrace so tight she laughed through her tears.

"You're sure?" he asked, his voice a mix of awe and disbelief.

"Yes. I went to the doctor yesterday. Everything's fine. I wanted to tell you like this."

Viren held her face in his hands, his thumbs brushing the corners of her eyes.

"This is... I don't even have words," he murmured. "You've just changed everything. Again."

They sat like that for a long while, wrapped in each other, letting the moment settle into their bones.

Later that evening, Viren called Maya. He didn't need to say much; the tremble in his voice was enough for her to guess. And Viren was sure that Sushima might have already told this to Maya earlier. There was laughter, loud ululations from the other end, and promises of hand-knit baby clothes already being made in her head.

That night, as they lay together, Viren resting his hand on Sushima's stomach, he whispered, "It's strange, you know... I thought my life started the day I married you. But now, I think it's about to begin all over again."

Sushima smiled, resting her hand over his.

"We're writing a new story now. A new chapter with a new heartbeat."

Outside, the wind carried the scent of blooming jasmine, and somewhere in the city, the first kites of spring tugged softly at the sky.

Inside their home, a family had quietly begun to grow.

Three Steps to Eternity



The house had been full of soft chaos in the days leading up to **Mahashtami**. Maya had taken full charge of the puja, cleaning the house, stringing marigold garlands on every door, soaking rice for Bhog, and setting up the small altar with framed deities and silver lamps. Even Sushima, though in her eighth month and noticeably slower, insisted on helping fold Aam Patta into cones, stirring the kheer gently, her hands cradling her belly more protectively now.

Viren, meanwhile, had become her constant shadow. From holding her elbow while she climbed stairs to reading baby books aloud at night and researching the safest car seats, he had slipped into fatherhood even before the baby arrived. At night, he would rest his hand on her belly and whisper stories, hoping the little one inside could hear.

"You're going to have the best papa in the world," Sushima would say with a tired smile, often brushing his hair back as he dozed off beside her.

Maya, too, had transformed into the quintessential Indian mother-in-law, one who watched every bite Sushima ate, massaged her feet with warm oil, and sometimes scolded Viren for not doing enough, though he was doing

everything. There was a comfort in their little world, woven from love, routines, and hope.

But that **Mahashtami** morning shattered their careful peace.

It began with mild cramps, which Maya dismissed as “normal.” But by late afternoon, the discomfort became sharper, more rhythmic. Then came the sudden gush of water, and panic rushed in like a storm. Maya was the first to react, shouting for Viren, who dropped the offering tray he was holding.

Within minutes, they were in the car. Viren drove through Delhi’s Pujo-crowded roads, honking, praying, muttering under his breath, one hand on the steering wheel and the other clutching Sushima’s trembling fingers.

At the hospital, chaos followed. Preterm labour at eight months. Fetal distress. Emergency C-section.

The last thing Sushima saw before being wheeled into the OT was Viren’s pale, terrified face.

“I’ll be right here,” he had said, gripping her hand as if trying to transfer all his strength into her.

And he was. Right there, pacing the hallway like a locomotive engine endlessly shunting at a busy station, unable to rest. His phone buzzed with messages. Relatives, friends, Maya, who was seated in the waiting lounge, was reciting silent mantras. But Viren barely registered anything. His eyes were fixed on the OT doors, his ears desperate for that one announcement.

And then something caught his attention.

The reception TV, usually an afterthought, had a large red banner flashing

BREAKING NEWS.

MLA's Wife Commits Suicide in Delhi Bungalow

Viren paused mid-step.

The anchor's voice was sharp and clear:

"In an act of tragic desperation, the wife of MLA Sandeep Rathore consumed sleeping pills, slit her wrists, and then hanged herself. Sources confirm years of domestic abuse. A diary was recovered titled '**Three Steps to Eternity.**' The name of the deceased is **Ritu Sharma...**"

The words hit Viren like a falling steel gate.

He froze. For a second, the hospital, the OT, even the baby vanished. He staggered to a nearby chair, eyes still glued to the screen.

"Three Steps to Eternity..."

That wasn't just a coincidence. That was his Ritu, and the diary she used to write. The one she wouldn't let anyone read. The one he'd once jokingly said sounded like a tragic novel title.

Ritu Sharma

His soulmate, his lifelong love.

And now... she was gone.

Dead.

Brutally, painfully, unmistakably gone.

He pulled out his phone, fingers trembling, and googled the name. Sandeep Rathore. MLA. Wife. Ritu Sharma. There it was. Her face. A few years older. Eyes less bright, smile more forced. But it was her. A photo from some event. Another from their wedding.

The article was long. Detailed. A story of pain, silencing, power, and finally, the haunting finality of escape.

Viren couldn't breathe. His heart was thudding so loud it echoed in his ears. Guilt, regret, helplessness every emotion clawed at him.

He wanted to scream. To cry. To hold someone. To hold her.

But instead, a soft sound pierced his spiral. A nurse's voice called out:

"Viren Ji?

Congratulations.

It's a Girl.

Mother is recovering.

You can meet the baby now."

He looked up, dazed. The world tilted back to focus.

A Girl.

His daughter.

Full Circle: Shackled Spirals of the Orbit



The corridor to the neonatal ward felt unusually long to Viren. His steps were heavy, not with fatigue, but with the unbearable weight of conflicting emotions. The nurse ahead of him chatted lightly about the baby being a healthy preemie and how she already had a strong grip. But her words came to him like echoes under water. His mind was still stuck on the television screen, the breaking news, the image of her.

Ritu.

Gone.

And now, another name waited just behind the glass doors, Father.

As the doors swung open, the scent of antiseptic filled his lungs. The lights were soft. A room full of tiny miracles wrapped in pastel blankets. But it was only one cot that pulled him in cot number 12. His daughter.

She was sleeping, her cheeks puffed like soft bread, a tuft of dark hair poking out from her knitted cap. The nurse smiled and gently lifted the baby, placing her in Viren's hesitant arms. And in that moment, time stilled.

Viren looked down and gasped.

The shape of the eyes. The arch of the eyebrows. Even the dimple on the left cheek when her mouth twitched in sleep.

He had seen that face before. A thousand times in memory.

It was her.

Ritu.

He blinked, his breath hitching in his throat. It wasn't imagination. The resemblance was uncanny, eerie, almost supernatural. It was as if fate, tired of life's cruelty, had woven Ritu back into the world in the form of this new soul, this tiny, helpless little being now curled into his arms.

He didn't cry. Not yet. He couldn't. The emotions tangled in him were too complex for tears.

One side of his heart was breaking, still bleeding from the silent, brutal end that Ritu had met. The woman who had once filled notebooks with poetry and plans. Who had dreamt of love but had been handed cruelty instead. He imagined her writing that final line in her diary. Alone. Determined. Lost.

And the other side of his heart was filling. Swelling with something he had never known before. His daughter's tiny fingers were moving now, wrapping themselves instinctively around his forefinger. As if anchoring him back to earth. Back to life.

Her grip was impossibly small, impossibly strong.

Viren bent down, pressing a trembling kiss to her forehead.

"Thank you," he whispered, his voice hoarse. **"Thank you for coming back to me, Ritu."**

He didn't know if it was madness or magic. Rebirth or resemblance. But what he did know was this: he wouldn't let this miracle slip away. Not again. Not in this life.

"This time," he murmured, **"I'll protect you. I'll hold on. I won't let you go."**

Behind him, through the glass, Maya watched with a gentle smile, and somewhere down the corridor, Sushima slept peacefully, her own heart unaware of the strange stitching of destinies that had just taken place.

Outside, the city buzzed with its usual rhythm, unaware that a soul had returned in silence.

And inside that quiet hospital nursery, Viren held his daughter, a whisper of the past, a promise for the future.

The circle was complete.

The story had begun again.