

No More  
Goodness  
Please

Shivani Dalal



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**Sirgun**- (n) the simple, unselfish joy that  
something good has happened to someone else.

*...because closure, perhaps, is only an illusion — and sometimes, we simply learn to live with the unanswered parts of people and stories alike.*



# 1

The corridor was quiet, soaked in the kind of silence that lingered after long conversations had ended and the echoes of laughter had dried up. Ishan sat hunched over on the edge of his bed, the light from his study lamp casting long, tired shadows on the floor. His phone lay face-down on the desk, untouched for hours. He wasn't reading. Not really.

Then came the soft thud of approaching footsteps. Familiar. Steady. The door creaked open slightly—just enough for Sachin to lean in, shoulder tilted against the frame. There was that humbling smile again. Wry. Worn-out. The kind of smile people wear when they've managed to mask a heartbreak just enough to make it through the day.

"By the way," Sachin said, voice casual, too casual, "I deleted her number today."

Ishan looked up, eyebrows raised slightly. But he didn't say anything. Sachin exhaled, the breath catching somewhere between defiance and defeat. "Photos are tougher," he added, looking at a spot above Ishan's head. "Maybe someday I'll have the strength to delete those too."

A pause. A glance. A small nod from Ishan. Just that. No words. But perhaps Sachin knew that silence too had its own grammar between old childhood acquaintance cum flatmates. Sachin turned, half-smiling again, and made to leave—shoulders squared, feet dragging a little more than they should have. But then he stopped. Just past the door, he turned back with a little U-turn, leaned on the doorframe again—same

position, same humbling smile, but this time, the eyes were different. Wilder. Wetter.

“But bro...” he said, a laugh threatening to break the grief in his throat, “deleting her number doesn’t even make sense, honestly.” He tilted his head, grinning faintly.

“It’s 618421...”

“...8888,” Ishan finished without missing a beat.

They looked at each other then—half laughing, half crumbling. Their voices had joined in rhythm, like they always used to, like memory hadn’t yet faded and hurt hadn’t yet taken full control. The number hung in the air like an old tune they both still remembered, no matter how hard they tried to forget. And then they laughed. God, they laughed. Not because it was funny. Not because they had moved on. But because laughter was all they had left to dam the flood at the edge of their eyes. Neither of them dared to look too long. Neither of them dared to mention the shine collecting in the other’s lashes. It was understood—some silences deserved to stay untouched.

Then Sachin whispered, almost to himself but loud enough for Ishan to catch it:

“It’s stupid, isn’t it? How someone can become a number... and still stay more than everything.” Ishan didn’t reply. But his hand reached for the phone on the table, still facedown. Not to check messages. Just to hold it.

Sometimes, that’s all you can do.

## 2

Sachin, 28, born and raised in a small, sleepy village named Madhogarh in Uttar Pradesh, Software Engineer in a reputed multinational company (he works with a calm efficiency at Infosys's Bangalore office)

Sachin is the kind of man who doesn't complicate life with too many thoughts. He lives simply and thinks even simpler. There's no flair for deep philosophies or clever proverbs in his conversations- only honesty. But that very simplicity is what makes him magnetic.

Tall and strongly built, Sachin carries the effortless strength passed down by his father, a former engineer turned farmer. His body is a quiet testimony to the discipline of his roots, yet it's his smile- genuine, soft, heart-melting—that people remember him by. His small almond-shaped eyes carry a quiet warmth — the kind that makes a person feel seen without being examined. His voice is the very epitome of masculinity: deep, grounded, steady. And yet, whenever he speaks, there is such softness in his tone, such effortless respect and kindness, that one almost feels like melting just to continue listening to him a little longer.

His beard is never properly trimmed. His hair — thick, curly, rebellious — looks like it has never once surrendered itself to a comb. But that is precisely what makes him who he is. Unfiltered. Slightly undone. Real.

He does not speak in metaphors. He has no habit of throwing around profound quotes or dramatic philosophies.

Simplicity sits naturally on him. And somehow, that simplicity becomes its own kind of poetry.

Even in chaos, he remains calm. Not performatively calm — just steady in a way that quiets the room around him.

But his room?

That is an entirely different story.

Sachin's room is a small, semi-lit corner of their flat—where open books, half-drunk coffee mugs, headphones, and phone chargers lie like pieces of a jigsaw that no one's in a hurry to complete. His study desk is often littered with printouts, pens with missing caps, a forgotten biscuit wrapper or two, and sometimes even an opened novel he never planned to finish. But amidst this scattered life, his smile and kindness are always in place—measured, stable, and comforting. His wardrobe might be messy, but his interactions are always crisp. He remembers birthdays, listens even when he has a deadline, and often leaves late-night "good luck" notes outside Ishan's door before interviews or big days.

Sachin's father spent a major part of his professional life working in Andhra Pradesh, which meant the family often lived far away from their native village. Despite the physical distance, their attachment to their roots remained strong and deeply valued. Every summer vacation, Sachin's father would take leave from work, and the family would travel back to the village to spend time in their ancestral home.

The old house was more than just a property; it carried generations of memories and emotions. Whenever they visited, the family would carefully clean and maintain the house so it would remain in good condition until their next return. During the rest of the year, Dadaji and Chachu took care of the ancestral home and ensured that it remained looked after in the family's absence.

Years before Sachin was born, the family experienced two heartbreaking losses that left a deep emotional impact on

everyone. Dadiji passed away suddenly due to a cardiac arrest, a tragedy that shook the family at a time when they were already navigating many responsibilities and uncertainties in life. Her absence created an emotional void within the household, especially for Sachin's parents and Chachu, who had relied greatly on her presence and strength.

Not long after Dadiji's passing, Sachin's parents welcomed their first child, a baby girl. However, the joy of her birth lasted only a few moments. Due to complications during delivery, the baby suffered from a severe lack of oxygen. The doctors could see her tiny limbs gradually turning lifeless, and despite every effort, she passed away within minutes of being born. The child had not even been named before the family was forced to confront the unimaginable pain of losing her.

Sachin's mother remained unconscious after the difficult delivery and was unaware of the tragedy immediately after childbirth. When she finally regained consciousness, it was Dadiji's memory and absence that made the moment even more painful, as there was no maternal figure left to comfort her through the loss. The heartbreaking news was eventually broken to her by the elders of her family. The grief left her shattered, but much of the emotional trauma remained unspoken, quietly carried within her over the years.

Sachin's father, overwhelmed with shock and grief, carried the infant in his bare hands to the graveyard. Accompanying him was Chachu, who stood firmly beside his elder brother as his greatest support during one of the darkest moments of their lives. The loss deeply affected the family, yet like many tragedies within traditional households, the pain was endured silently rather than openly discussed.

With time, life slowly regained its rhythm. The family learned to live with the sorrow, accepting the child's passing as fate. Years later, when Sachin was born, his arrival brought renewed hope and healing into the household and then after

two years, Zara was born. Though the memories of the losses never truly disappeared, the family carried forward with resilience, preserving both their grief and their love as inseparable parts of their shared history.

Sachin studied in a school in Hyderabad along with his younger sister, Zara, who was two classes junior to him. It was during their school years that their lives crossed paths with Ishan. Unlike them, Ishan joined the school a little later, when his family decided to move him to the school because they believed, it offered better teaching facilities. His younger brother, Amit, also shifted to the same school along with him.

Ishan originally from Dharmavaram, a silk-weaving town in Andhra Pradesh, Ishan recently turned 29 and running 30—though he still finds it hard to accept the fact that he is officially an uncle now. A dedicated freelancer, he is deeply passionate about his career in graphic design. He constantly enrolls in courses to refine his skills and keeps himself updated with the latest trends and technological advancements, ensuring he stays relevant and competitive in the ever-evolving creative industry.

They were not always as close as they would later become. In fact, for most of their school years, Sachin and Ishan were barely more than familiar faces—students who crossed paths in crowded corridors, occasionally exchanging polite nods before moving on with their own circles and routines. Their friendship truly began only in 11th grade, when fate placed them side by side in physics and chemistry classes.

What started as small academic exchanges slowly grew into something far more meaningful. Borrowed pens, shared notebooks, whispered discussions during practical, and late-night phone calls before examinations gradually dissolved the distance between them. Somewhere between chapters on electromagnetism and covalent bonding, they discovered a

friendship that felt effortless—one that required neither constant validation nor elaborate explanations.

Ishan was, in many ways, the complete opposite of Sachin. Where Sachin carried a sporty energy, Ishan was calm and composed. He was shy, soft-spoken, clean-shaven, and carried himself with a quiet gentleness that people noticed almost immediately. Yet beneath his reserved nature lived a deeply sentimental person. Even years later, he still remembered a compliment once given to him by his English teacher in school, who had casually called him “Mr. Cute Smile.” It was a fleeting remark, forgotten by almost everyone else, but not by Ishan. He preserved it carefully within himself, like a small keepsake folded into memory.

His room reflected the same quiet order that defined his personality. Everything had its place, and nothing ever seemed unnecessarily out of order. Beside the window stood a wooden study table, always clean and uncluttered. A digital clock, a neatly placed glass of water, and a pen holder filled with color-coded highlighters remained arranged in the exact same spots every day, as though routine itself gave him comfort.

His bookshelf revealed another side of him. The Harry Potter series occupied most of the space—books he had long intended to read properly but somehow never did. Alongside them rested an antique Harry Potter-themed musical gift, one of his most treasured possessions. Whenever opened, it played a mysterious, almost ominous yet strangely exciting melody that instantly filled the room with nostalgia and wonder. It had been gifted to him by someone dear, and perhaps that was why he valued it so deeply.

Even his smallest habits carried sincerity. Every morning, without fail, Ishan made his bed carefully and neatly—not out of discipline alone, but with a strange affection for the comfort it gave him. It was almost as if he prepared it each morning

with the quiet promise that he would return to it later, carrying back the weight of another ordinary day.

Yet, behind this orderliness lies a deep need for control—perhaps over emotions he doesn't always understand. He helps others without being asked and notices things no one mentions, like Sachin skipping dinner or wearing the same shirt twice in a row.

A compact 2BHK apartment, their flat sits on the 3rd floor of an aging building tucked behind a busy market street. It's neither lavish nor rundown—just enough to hold two people and their private storms. The living room is a blend of comfort and quiet compromise—Sachin's dumbbell rests against Ishan's IKEA bookshelf, as if the space itself has learned to share. The sofa carries a slight dip in the middle, shaped by countless late-night movies and unspoken conversations. A small balcony opens out to a modest view: a lone streetlight, a manicured patch of green grass they pay far too much in maintenance for, and a sky that sometimes offers a hazy sunset or a perfectly clean line of sunrise. They fondly call it their "Sunday Morning Window." But never witnessed any.

The kitchen belongs entirely to Ishan. It's always spotless, jars neatly organised, the fridge reliably stocked with milk and fresh curd. Everything has a place, and everything stays in it. Sachin, however, claims a small corner near the microwave as his own. That's where his coffee setup lives — a jar of his favourite instant brew and three mugs. Out of those three, one stands out. It's old, chipped, once broken and carefully glued back together. The surface is rugged, the crack clearly visible, but it still stands firm — like a soldier who has seen war and returned. He keeps it not because it's perfect, but because it was a gift. And to him, gifts aren't disposable. They are meant to be preserved, valued, and carried forward.

Sachin's attachment to things reflects Kintsugi — the art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with powdered gold. Instead of hiding cracks, Kintsugi highlights them, treating breakage as part of the object's history rather than something to disguise. The idea is simple yet profound: flaws and fractures are not weaknesses; they add character and beauty. The repaired piece becomes more meaningful because of what it has survived. For Sachin, mending is devotion. However, every time Sachin and Ishan sat down together for a cup of coffee, the conversation inevitably drifted to Sachin's old mug. Ishan never missed the opportunity to persuade him to replace it with a new one. With a teasing smile, he would say, "Just let me gift you a new mug. It will save me the trouble of scrolling through gift ideas for you on every occasion—and honestly, it'll be much more pocket-friendly for me too."

Sachin would burst into laughter every time he heard this, because he knew the real reason behind Ishan's insistence. All Ishan truly wanted was for that old mug and old memory to finally be replaced.

Ishan, quietly believes in something closer to Wabi-sabi — an aesthetic philosophy that accepts impermanence and natural decay. From this perspective, not everything needs to be restored. Some things are allowed to end. If an object breaks and no longer holds itself together, perhaps that is simply its time. Letting go can be as honest as preserving. For Ishan, release is wisdom.

Their flat doesn't smell of incense — it smells of people: the scent of hot chai, sometimes filtered coffee, half-wet clothes drying inside, and sometimes, a hint of sadness no one talks about. But it's theirs. Their friendship, much like their flat, isn't perfect—but it's **home**.

# 3

Sachin turned 29 on one Sunday of August. The kind of Sunday where the sun forgets to shine too brightly, and the wind carries a certain pause. The kind where the world seems muted, and even memories tread lightly. In his small flat, a cake sat on the table—a quiet chocolate truffle with "Happy Birthday, Sachin" messily written by the baker who probably didn't know he was writing on the loneliest cake in the city. Next to it: two candles, unlit. No streamers, no guests, no phone calls apart from the customary ones.

But the cake hadn't appeared by magic. Ishan—Sachin's school friend turned flatmate—was told to order a cake while he was away. The call had come out of nowhere; his father needed him home urgently. In the scramble that followed, he'd stuffed clothes into a duffel bag, muttering small apologies under his breath for missing Sachin's birthday as he knelt to tie his shoelaces.

Ishan had a younger brother who was still studying—an intelligent, slightly nerdy boy pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. He had the potential to crack the civil services one day; in fact, he had initially enrolled in an Arts programme with that goal in mind. But by the end of his first semester, he shifted to Fine Arts after watching his father struggle to keep the family's small antique-handicraft business alive. Fewer youngsters were interested in learning the traditional techniques that gave their craft its authenticity. Switching his stream felt like a small sacrifice, a quiet contribution he could make to support his family's legacy. Both brothers grew up

observant, grounded, and deeply obedient—traits that tied them closely to their home and each other.

Sachin had spent the morning replying to a few ‘Happy Birthday’ messages and ignoring a few more. But one message—just one—remained unseen in his inbox. Raina. Two years without a word, but still, something inside him waited. People called it foolish. He called it loyalty.

Zara, his younger sister, would have laughed at him for overthinking everything. She was his opposite in almost every way—fierce, opinionated, unapologetically fiery. A final-year literature student, she was known for quoting Adrienne Rich while bargaining over vegetable prices, as if poetry and protest were part of her daily vocabulary. Once, she had marched into Sachin’s office with a backpack stuffed with balloons, declaring, “Bhai, birthdays are meant to be loud.” Last year, she was the only one who had come over—cake, candles, and chaos in her arms. She had gifted him the notebook he now scribbled in. “So you can write what you’ll never say aloud,” she had told him, flopping dramatically onto his bed.

She had wanted to study at Delhi, but when her brother’s job anchored him in Bangalore, their parents chose a college there so the two could stay close. Zara, however, was unwilling to accept comfort as a compromise. Determined to carve out her own space, she insisted on opting for a hostel and experiencing life independently. Their parents agreed—reluctantly, and perhaps to avoid a debate that would inevitably turn into a full-blown argument. In the end, it felt like a quiet win for everyone.

He took out his leather-bound notebook. A birthday gift from Zara last year—the only person who had shown up that day. On the first page, he’d written: “To love is to wait in silence.” Today, he scribbled on a new page:

“Another year.

Still too much heart.

Still too much hope.

Still, no Raina.”

Tonight, when the candles flickered in his empty flat, Sachin lit them alone, smiled alone, and made a slice of cake for the chair opposite him.

For Raina, if only in spirit.

He poured himself a glass of Coke, held it up in a quiet, mock-toast and whispered, “To self. Happy Birthday.” Just as the room settled back into silence, his phone buzzed. A message from Zara. “Don’t worry. No abs, but full character arc. Proud of you.” Sachin laughed softly. For once, it reached his eyes. He placed the untouched cake slice back on the table, scribbled again in the notebook—

"To wait is a kind of faith too."

He remembered how different things used to be when distance stood between them.

Every month carried this unbearable craving to meet each other — to somehow fix the miles, to close the gap, and to pour as much love into the little time they got together as possible.

And on one birthday, when Raina couldn’t make it to him, she sent a cake instead.

The cake, however, came with conditions. Since the delivery was being managed by the very reluctant Ishan, Raina had to bribe him into it with two coffee mugs. One for Ishan, and one very intentionally chosen for Sachin.

A smile found its way onto his face as he remembered it.

The mug had a thin golden lining across the rim, while the rest of it remained plain white — simple, elegant, almost quietly personal. And engraved near its base were the words:

“If coffee could fix everything.”

Since then, the mug had become strangely precious to him.

And even now, whenever Sachin drank coffee from it, a small part of him wondered whether coffee really could fix things — the distance, the silence, the gap that had somehow grown between them again.

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The scent of old ink and the sound of his pen scratching paper took him back to a day in seventh grade. The day he got punished for something he didn't do.

The teacher's voice had boomed through the corridor: "Who placed the gum on my chair?"

Silence. Except for a few suppressed giggles.

Sachin had known who it was. Arman, the class clown, had done it on a dare. But no one would speak. So, the teacher declared that the whole class would stay back unless someone owned up. "I did it," Sachin had said, barely above a whisper. He stood outside the class during recess, hands behind his back, staring at the Neem tree in the school courtyard. When Mihir found him, he asked, "Why didn't you just name Arman?"

Sachin had shrugged. "Because someone had to take it. And I knew I could."

That was the beginning—of a reputation, of roles, of a box he never asked for. The "nice guy." The good boy. The one everyone trusted to keep secrets, cover lies, share notes before exams. He never raised his voice, never pushed back. But inside, he remembered everything—every cut, every silence, every friend who vanished the moment he needed them.

There were countless little stories behind this reputation, but one from his 12th board practical's stayed with him the most. A day before their Chemistry practical, Akshay, a friend had asked to borrow his file—typical last-minute scrambling,

the kind boys do when writing and maintaining a practical record feels like torture. Sachin handed it over without a second thought.

The next morning, when he asked for it back, Akshay simply denied ever taking it. His tone was casual, almost blank, as if Sachin had imagined the whole exchange. And Sachin, stunned and embarrassed, stood in front of the externals without his file—bearing the consequences of someone else’s mistake and someone else’s lie. Why Akshay did that is still a mystery. But the strange part—the part that confuses even Sachin when he thinks about it—is that he never brought it up again. Their bond stayed intact. Akshay still calls or messages, but only when he needs help. And Sachin still shows up every single time.

The next afternoon, Sachin cleaned Ishan’s room. Not out of boredom, but because he had offered his own room to Ankusha, a colleague from his office. She had been looking for a place to crash temporarily—her PG was being painted, and Bangalore’s monsoon had drowned her second option.

Ishan wouldn’t have liked it—someone using his space—so Sachin made a quiet decision. He offered his own room to Ankusha, and shifted himself into Ishan’s. But not before he did what he never usually did—he cleaned.

He changed the bedsheet, sprayed Zara’s lavender linen mist across the pillow, wiped the desk clean, even sorted the bookshelf. He lined up the pens, cleaned the fan, folded blankets properly. It felt oddly respectful.

Ankusha arrived with a small backpack and a calm, collected presence also with a small gift for Sachin. She was different—not dramatic, not sentimental. Sharp-eyed, no-nonsense, the kind of woman who always knew where her charger was. She worked in the design wing and spoke like her words were chosen from a catalogue—measured and clean. She smiled politely when Sachin opened the door.

“You didn’t have to go through all this trouble,” she said. And handed over the gift to Sachin explaining two reasons for it—his belated birthday and providing her a place to crash down.

“I had to, and I wanted to” he smiled back.

Later, he called Ishan to tell him. “Hey,” he said casually. “All okay?” came the familiar voice.

“Yeah. Ankusha needed a place to stay for a few days. Don’t overthink it—I put her in my room. Shifted my stuff to yours. Cleaned up too. Didn’t touch that psycho pen drawer of yours.”

Ishan let out a short laugh. “Sachin, if my green pen is sitting next to the blue one again, we’re fighting.”

“You’ll survive. And relax—I arranged them better than you do. Alphabetical order now.”

A brief silence followed before Ishan spoke again, quieter this time. “Thanks, bhai. Seriously. You didn’t have to shift out.”

“I know.” Sachin leaned back with a grin in his voice. “But you’d have lost your mind if someone messed with your space. And honestly, I’m not interested in getting murdered in my sleep by a Harry Potter fanatic over misplaced stationery.”

Ishan scoffed. “Shut up.”

“I’m serious. I respect the system, brother. Your room has rules. Boundaries. Weird ones, but still.”

“Good. At least somebody in this house understands basic civilization.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get emotional now.”

The week passed the way smoke drifts in a closed room—slow, quiet, and lingering longer than expected.

Ankusha stayed. She wasn’t stuck—she had options—but something about the flat, its lived-in rhythm, its clumsy charm, the smell of burnt toast and Dettol floors, felt like a pause she

hadn't known she needed. She moved through the space softly, like someone aware they were stepping through memories not their own. Her presence didn't disrupt the home's flow—it simply layered it.

And Sachin remained Sachin. Polite. Consistent. Generous in the way people are when they don't know how to protect themselves. He offered her tea before she asked, let her choose the playlist, made space in the fridge for her almond milk without comment. But he kept his warmth at arm's length—close enough to comfort, far enough to not confuse.

Ankusha noticed the kindness, of course. And the stillness behind his eyes. The way he listened with all of him, the way he remembered small things—how she preferred cold coffee without ice, how she hated coriander in chutney. But she also noticed the wall. The quiet one. The one where Raina still lived which only Sachin knew.

One night, after Ishan had settled back into the flat and was still trying to adjust to the presence of another girl sharing their space, he and Sachin sat out on the balcony, sipping Bournvita like two old men who had turned emotional unavailability into a personality trait. The city hummed in the background, soft and restless. And Ishan—true to form—picked honesty, though he wrapped it neatly in mischief.

“You know she likes you, right?” Sachin didn't look up. “She likes my cooking.”

Ishan smirked. “She likes your hair.” That made Sachin pause—just a beat too long.

Sachin's brain echoed- That messy hair? No. That was Raina's compliment to give, and no one else's. No matter how many people admired it, only her words mattered. That hair had once been brushed by her fingers, tugged when she was teasing, ruffled when she was proud. Anything else felt... borrowed. (Sachin thought to himself, a blurry image of sweet Raina came across his chaotic mind, the blurry not because it

has been long to see her in person but because of the tears which were dwelling up in his eyes, he blinked his eyes, swallowed the pain of tears and came back to reality and things were different, Raina had turned Sachin's mind even more chaotic like a rumble of woollen fibre ball).

"She deserves someone uncomplicated," Sachin said, his voice low. "You're not complicated," Ishan countered, "You're just... locked."

Sachin said nothing. Ishan sipped, then added with mock menace, "Look, I'm just saying—if you don't make a move, maybe I will. Love triangle, drama, full Bollywood climax. You know me."

Sachin chuckled. "She'd eat you alive." "Better eaten than frozen."

Silence fell again—comfortable, but heavy.

"Seriously," Ishan said, softer now. "It's okay to move on. Not because she's here. But because you're still there. And Raina... she's not." Sachin didn't respond. Not with words. Just a tired smile. One that meant he'd heard it all before and was still exactly where he was.

The next morning broke earlier than either of them would've liked. Ishan was shuffling around the flat half-awake, stuffing files and a couple of shirts into his bag for the week-long off-site in Chandigarh. He kept grumbling about how these "early morning corporate adventures" should be banned, but still moved with that familiar mix of reluctance and responsibility. By the time he stepped out, Sachin was leaning against the doorframe, teasing him about abandoning the flat so soon after settling back in.

While Ishan was away, the flat slipped into its own quiet rhythm. Sachin returned to his routine—replying to overdue emails, reaching out to people he had kept at arm's length,

pretending that nothing inside him was quietly rearranging itself.

And then came that one night. No trigger, no warning—just a sudden restlessness that refused to sit still. It pushed him to step out into the dark without a plan. He began walking, hoping the quiet streets might calm the storm inside his head. But the more he walked, the louder his thoughts became. The stillness of the late night only seemed to echo everything he was trying to avoid. His mind kept circling the same memories, the same questions, the same ache. Soon his steps grew quicker. What started as a walk turned into a hurried stride, and before he realized it, he was running. Faster and faster, as if he could outrun the thoughts chasing him. The air burned in his lungs, his breath coming in uneven bursts. The harder he tried to steady himself, the tighter his chest felt.

His vision blurred—not from exhaustion alone, but because every memory of Raina came crashing back at once: the connection, the loss, the ache that refused to fade. The longing for her presence, her voice, her quiet understanding.

He finally stopped, completely out of breath. His hands rested on his knees as he tried to pull air into his lungs, but his breathing refused to settle. Standing alone under the dim streetlights, he felt something inside him give way. And then he just... cracked. Tears streamed down his face without restraint—the kind of tears a person only let's fall when no one is around to see.

After a long while, drained and hollow, he slowly made his way back to the flat. By the time he reached the door, he had no energy left in him at all—just a heavy silence and exhaustion settling deep within.

Ankusha was still awake. She didn't ask a single question—not even a look of curiosity. She simply walked to the kitchen, made a cup of tea, and placed it in his hands. He gave her a tired, crooked smile, more gratitude than

expression, and carried the cup with him to the lobby. He didn't drink it. He just sat down on the floor, pulled his old leather Roadster jacket around himself—the one Raina had convinced him to buy, the one she'd once said made him look like trouble in the best way—and covered half his face with it, as if pretending she was close enough to breathe in. At some point, the exhaustion won. He fell asleep right there on the lobby carpet, wrapped in that jacket like it was a memory he couldn't let go of.

By dawn, he forced himself up. His eyes were swollen, his head heavy, but he tossed the untouched tea into the basin, washed the cup, and slipped back into his routine as if the night had never happened.

## ***Fragrance***

*Sometimes I catch your scent in the air,  
Though miles apart, I know you're there.  
Invisible threads that bind our souls,  
In your aroma, my heart consoles.  
My mind goes blank, lost in the chase,  
For you, I'd search every place.  
From any corner, you might appear,  
My racing heart, your presence dear.  
Peace may come with a racing beat,  
In your scent, our souls shall meet.  
Distance can't break the bond we share,  
In your fragrance, I find you everywhere.*

And that was the morning Ishan walked back in, returning from his weekend trip—completely unaware of the storm that had passed through the flat just hours before.

He rolled his suitcase in, fully expecting silence and perhaps a warm paratha. What he didn't expect was to find Ankusha—still in the flat, sipping tea from his mug.

He froze at the door. “You're still here?”

Before Ankusha could answer, Sachin appeared from the kitchen holding two plates of alloo paratha.

“I was going to call you,” he said. “Her room situation's still a mess. She needed a couple more days. I thought... she could stay.” Ishan raised an eyebrow. “In my room?” “No, she's still in mine. I've been bunking with you.

They resumed their school-boy dynamic: And though Ishan kept nudging—little jokes, comments like “If you don't see her, I will”—Sachin never wavered. He was kind to Ankusha. Gentle. A good friend.

But that was all. Because when the lights were out, and the day lay folded away behind closed eyelids, his thoughts still wandered to a name that tasted like regret.

Raina.

And the heart—no matter how bruised—was still loyal. Not because it couldn't change. But because it hadn't been allowed to, just yet.

## 4

There had never been raised hands in Sachin's house. But there had been raised voices. Raised eyebrows. And silence—sharp as glass—so constant it felt like wallpaper.

His father, Kaushal, had a voice like gravel and a presence that made rooms shrink. He was an engineer with a disciplined mind and an even more disciplined schedule. Woke at 5 a.m. sharp. Newspaper folded perfectly. Tea without sugar. No small talk. He wasn't cruel, just carved out of a kind of manhood that had no room for softness.

Sachin, on the other hand, was soft everywhere. He remembered crying over a dead sparrow at the age of nine. His mother had comforted him; his father had said, "You'll grow out of it." Sachin never did.

Dinner at their household was an orchestra of clinks and chews, and very little conversation. Sachin would steal glances at his father, wondering if he ever smiled at work, with friends, somewhere else—because he certainly didn't at home.

Kaushal never beat Sachin, never insulted him. But neither did he encourage him. When Sachin topped the 10th board exams, his father's only words were, "Good. Keep it up."

Zara, his younger sister, once joked, "papa treats praise like a currency on demonetisation day. Rare, outdated, and in limited supply." But Sachin had never hated his father. He didn't even resent him. Instead, he felt this aching mix of reverence and rejection—a boy trying to be a man in the image of someone he never fully understood.

In college, when he got selected for a national-level writing competition, Sachin called home, excited. His mother was thrilled. But when his father got on the phone, all he said was, “This writing thing... is it taking away from your real studies?”

That question stayed with Sachin more than any congratulations ever could.

Back in the present, Sachin sat alone again, this time scrolling through old texts. His father had messaged him just once this year: “Sent electricity bill. Pay before 5th.”

That night, he took out an old photo album. It was dusty and smelled like forgotten days. One picture stood out—an old black and white of kaushal, younger, smiling wide beside a motorcycle. Sachin stared at it, long and hard.

He remembered.

There was a time when his father had been the warmest person in the room. Jovial, quick with jokes, and curious about everything. At the dinner table, he would toss questions about current affairs in between bites of sabzi and roti. “Tell me, Sachin, why did India oppose the resolution in the UN last week?” Sachin, no older than seven then, would scramble to recall headlines. Zara, younger and mischievous, would pretend to yawn. Their mother would shake her head, laughing, “pls, let them eat first. India will still be there to talk about after dinner.”

Those were the golden years. Sachin had inherited his father’s logic, his precision, his stubborn refusal to back down in a debate. But his kindness—that unmistakable softness—that came from his mother. He used to think, we all get our kindness from our mothers.

But then, time began to change his father. Slowly. Quietly. Like tea left untouched, losing its warmth without anyone noticing.

Family tensions crept in the way they often do—through relatives, property discussions, wounded pride, and misunderstandings that refused to settle. What began as small disagreements slowly turned into storms that arrived without warning. In the middle of it all, Kaushal made a decision that surprised everyone. He left his job and moved back to the village with Maa and Zara, just as Zara was entering Class 12. Zara resisted. It was her board year—her most crucial academic phase. She argued, pleaded, tried to reason. But Kaushal was firm. He neither wanted to continue in that job nor leave his daughter in a hostel or under someone else's supervision. To him, being physically present mattered more than convenience or comfort.

By then, Sachin had already moved to Hyderabad for his graduation, building a life away from the shifting ground back home. And in the midst of these transitions, Dadaji passed away—age finally claiming what time had been quietly preparing for.

Sachin was informed much later. Kaushal did not want his son's studies to be disturbed. Zara, being at home in her 12th standard, witnessed everything—the rituals, the visitors, the constant flow of people. Sachin arrived only on the thirteenth day, when the final rituals were performed and the entire village was fed, as tradition required.

As a teenager trying hard to understand adulthood, Sachin observed his father differently that day. Kaushal took charge of everything—the arrangements, the food, the logistics, the people. He barely let Chachu intervene. It wasn't control; it was his way of loving. His way of honoring his father.

He looked exhausted. Pale. Shirt damp with sweat. It seemed as though he hadn't even paused for a glass of water. He moved from one corner of the courtyard to another,

managing guests, instructing workers, ensuring no one left unattended.

At one point, Sachin walked up to him quietly and handed him a bottle of water. Kaushal took it, gulped it down in one breath, wiped his forehead, and instead of resting, asked about Sachin's return- "When are you leaving? Don't miss your classes."

Sachin stood there, stunned. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to stay. To help. To shoulder even a fraction of what his father was carrying. But Kaushal was adamant. Education came first. Always. And so Sachin left.

Kaushal held everything in. He chose to absorb the chaos rather than let it spill into his children's lives. He fought his battles in silence, swallowing exhaustion, grief, and disappointment so they wouldn't have to taste it. He carried weights they never even knew existed—and perhaps never will.

And somewhere in that phase of life, an Erikson stage seemed to reach him earlier than most: generativity vs. stagnation. For Kaushal, it wasn't just a psychological theory—it was reality. He felt a deep urge to build, to protect, to ensure his family's future was steady and safe. That instinct pushed him to work harder, to think long-term, to make choices rooted in responsibility rather than desire. But the other side of the stage—the stagnation—hovered close. The fights, the disappointments, the sheer exhaustion of dealing with family politics sometimes made him feel stuck, drained, questioning whether his efforts even mattered. Yet he kept moving. Quiet, steady, determined. Because for him, generativity wasn't about grand achievements—it was about making sure his children grew up without carrying the weight he chose to bear alone.

Sachin understood it now. That was the kind of man his father had always been. Protective in silence. Steady in crisis. A fortress, not a garden.

“That’s what fathers do, right?” Sachin murmured to himself that night, still staring at the photo. “They protect us. Every possible time. Even from truths they can’t bear themselves.”

And just for a moment, he let himself believe that behind every silence from his father, there had always been love. Unspoken. But never absent.

# 5

It was a Thursday, the kind of rainy afternoon when Even Bangalore seems too tired to be loud. Zara arrived unannounced, as she always did—wearing her oversized college sweatshirt, lugging a tiffin of maggie from her hostel, a small tote full of “essential chaos,” and that particular energy that rearranged rooms without touching anything.

She didn’t knock. She never did.

“Why does your flat always smell like books and loneliness?” she asked the moment she stepped inside, toeing off her chappals like she owned the place.

Sachin, wrapped in a blanket and halfway through brewing his own clumsy version of explanation, didn’t even blink. “Because books don’t judge and loneliness doesn’t borrow my T-shirts.”

Zara dumped her bag on the couch, made a beeline for the kitchen, and took over as if the kettle had been calling her name. She opened the cabinets, frowned at the absence of ginger, and located sugar with the instincts of a bloodhound.

“Still drinking it bitter?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Still needing it sweet?” he replied.

“I don’t understand you,” she said, folding her arms. “One month you wake up and decide—no sugar. Then suddenly it’s no bread. Then no rice. What’s next? Air?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s called discipline.”

“It’s called drama,” she shot back. “I have no problem with you experimenting on your own diet, but poor Ishan ends

up suffering. You go on a cleanse and he's chewing cucumbers like it's a life choice."

"Excuse me," he laughed, "I don't make Ishan do anything. Do you really think I can force him to quit carbs? The moment I say 'no rice,' he orders biryani. Double portion. He eats like he's preparing for a famine."

"That's trauma," she declared. "Diet trauma. The boy hears 'no bread' and his survival instincts kick in."

"He told me once," Sachin grinned, "Bro, when you quit sugar, I panic. I don't know how long this phase will last."

"Exactly!" she pointed a finger at him. "You're not on a diet. You're on a series of dramatic character arcs."

"At least I try," he said defensively. "Health matters."

"And balance matters," she replied. "You can't detox your way through life every time you feel slightly guilty about dessert."

He smirked. "So what's your solution, Miss Literature?"

"My solution is simple," she said with mock seriousness. "Eat the cake. Then go for a walk. Revolutionary, I know."

He pretended to gasp. "Scandalous."

"And stop announcing it like a government policy. 'From tomorrow, no rice in this house.' Who are you? The Ministry of Carbohydrates?"

They both burst into laughter.

"Fine," he said between chuckles. "Next time I decide to quit something, I'll keep it confidential."

"Please do," she grinned. "Let Ishan live without fearing a food embargo."

"And if I actually stick to it for a month?"

"Then," she shrugged dramatically, "I'll personally bake you a cake to celebrate your consistency."

"Cruel."

“Balanced,” she corrected, and they dissolved into laughter again.

They sat on the floor, backs against the sofa, letting the steam from the tea curl up between them. Outside, the rain wasn’t letting up. Inside, the quiet carried history.

“I broke up with Samar,” Zara said, just like that.

Sachin didn’t flinch. He rarely did.

“Why?”

“He started making me feel like a side note in my own story. And you know I hate side notes.”

He nodded, sipping his tea. He didn’t need to ask more. Zara had always been decisive, razor-edged when it came to herself, and soft only when it came to him.

“And Mum and Dad,” she added. “They’re selling the house.”

He froze. “But... that’s home.”

“Too many ghosts now. Papa thinks it’s time.” Her voice held certainty, but also a pinch of fatigue. “I think he’s just tired.” They sat in silence for a beat before Zara, scanning the flat with sharper eyes this time, suddenly narrowed them at a corner of the room. “Wait... whose scarf is that?”

Sachin sighed.

“Don’t tell me there’s a girl living here now.”

“She’s a colleague,” he said. “Ankusha. Needed a place while flat hunting. She’s been here a few days.”

Zara smirked. “In this sanctum of heartbreak and forgotten laundry? Brave girl.”

“She’s in my room. I’ve shifted to Ishan’s,” he clarified.

She raised an eyebrow. “That is brave. Ishan’s going to lose his mind.”

Sachin nodded faintly. “I cleaned my room before she moved in. Like, actually cleaned.

Am I also inhaling the familiar lavender disinfectant from your room? Zara enquired

Sachin nodded a yes.

“Mine?” Zara blinked. “Oh, that’s where it went. I’ve been tearing my room apart looking for it.”

He shrugged, almost sheepish. “Borrowed. Temporarily.”

Zara stared at him as if he’d just confessed to climbing Everest. “You? Cleaned? Voluntarily?”

“She’s... nice,” he admitted, running a hand through his already unruly hair. “I didn’t want her to feel awkward.”

Zara’s expression softened instantly. “Of course you didn’t. God forbid someone walks into your life and feels anything less than safe.”

He gave her a look. “Can I please have it back, though? If you’re done being dramatic about it?”

“It’s my disinfectant. I would like it returned if you’re finished impressing her.”

“I wasn’t impressing her.”

“You deep-cleaned your room.”

“I was being decent.”

“You arranged pens and books alphabetically.”

“That was strategic.”

“You used scented disinfectant.”

“That was... atmospheric.”

She folded her arms, triumphant. “You don’t even like lavender.”

Zara paused, watching him with that infuriatingly perceptive smile. Then, softer now, almost teasing—

“And does she like you?”

Sachin blinked. “That’s not the point.”

“Oh, it’s absolutely the point.”

He looked away, pretending to inspect a crack in the wall. “She hasn’t complained.”

Zara grinned. “That’s not an answer.”

“It’s a good sign.”

She nudged him lightly. “You cleaned your room. You borrowed my disinfectant. Bhai, you’re already halfway in love.”

He groaned. “Stop.”

She laughed. “Relax. I’m just saying... if she makes you clean without even asking, she’s powerful.”

“And if she doesn’t?” he shot back.

“Then you’re doomed,” she declared dramatically.

Sachin didn’t respond, but his silence wasn’t neutral. His eyes flicked toward the window, where the rain painted streaks of silver against the glass.

Zara leaned back. “You know, not everyone’s Raina.”

Still nothing.

After a moment, he added, “Speaking of ghosts of the past—Sameer’s coming tomorrow.”

Zara blinked. “Sameer?”

“Yep. my school friend. your senior. Remember him?”

“I remember.” she cleared her throat. “He messaged me about an exam. Needed a place to crash. I said yes.”

“You didn’t tell Ishan yet, did you?” Zara asked, lips twitching.

“I will. Eventually.”

“Ishan’s dramatic,” Sachin said. “But he’s loyal.”

Zara smirked, “He’s loyal and possessive about his drawer space. You’ve been warned.”

Sachin glanced at the clock. Ankusha and Ishan were both at the office. He had chosen to work from home for the month, claiming the traffic but really needing the quiet. Zara

had turned the flat into a dialogue, though—adding warmth and just the right amount of interrogation.

Zara was sprawled across the beanbag when she looked up at Sachin again.

“Tell me something honestly,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “If you knew someone liked you... like genuinely liked you... and she wasn’t Raina, would you ever give her a chance?”

Sachin barely looked up from his cup.

“No.”

The answer came so quickly that Zara blinked.

“That was rude,” she muttered.

“It was honest,” he replied calmly. “I wouldn’t let someone carry hopes that were never theirs to begin with.”

There was no arrogance in his tone. Just the same maddening certainty he carried about everything.

Zara studied him carefully but didn’t argue this time. She simply nodded, like someone who had stopped trying to drag a person away from their principles and instead learned to quietly sit beside them.

Before either of them could continue, the doorbell rang.

A few minutes later, Ishan walked in lazily, tossing his keys onto the table before dropping dramatically onto the couch.

“Wow,” he sighed. “Tea session without me again. Betrayal really runs deep in this house.”

“Sit quietly,” Zara shot back. “Nobody invited you.”

Sachin smirked faintly while Ishan shamelessly reached for his cup anyway.

Then, as always, the conversation drifted into meaningless banter.

And somehow, inevitably, Ankusha became the topic.

“You know,” Ishan said casually, stealing another biscuit, “I really think Ankusha is deeply obsessed with me at this point.”

Zara looked up immediately. “Please. That girl barely tolerates you.”

“That’s called suppressed affection,” he replied confidently.

Sachin gave him a flat look. “That’s called irritation.”

Ignoring him completely, Ishan continued dramatically, “The way she ignores me so passionately? Cinema. Pure cinema.”

Zara burst out laughing while Sachin shook his head in disbelief.

“You’re delusional,” Sachin muttered.

“No,” Ishan corrected with complete seriousness, “I’m protecting your image. Someone in this family has to handle emotional public relations.”

That earned him the cushion Sachin threw directly at his face.

Ishan laughed loudly, clearly pleased with himself for successfully shifting the attention.

Then Zara, still grinning from the banter, suddenly looked toward him again.

“Actually,” she said thoughtfully, “tell me something honestly. How did Raina even fall for bhai and not you?”

For a moment, Ishan almost choked on his tea.

“I mean it,” she continued casually. “You both were incredibly close long before bhai entered her life. You understood her humour, matched her energy, and honestly...” she gestured vaguely between them, “...you and Raina made far more sense on paper.”

Ishan leaned back slowly, amused.

Meanwhile Sachin visibly regretted remaining in the room.

“You know what I mean, right?” Zara continued. “Bhai is so rigid sometimes. Even with jokes. Even with emotions. And don’t even get me started on his moral boundaries. Everything with him is disciplined, structured, thought-through. While you...” she pointed at Ishan, “...you’re easy. Comfortable. Effortless.”

There was no judgment in her voice.

Just genuine curiosity.

“She laughed with you differently,” Zara added softly. “Like someone who felt understood without trying too hard.”

Silence settled briefly across the room.

Then Ishan smiled faintly and looked away.

“That’s exactly why she never fell for me.”

Zara frowned instantly. “What does that even mean?”

“It means,” he said quietly, “some people become home to you so naturally that your heart stops considering the possibility of loving them differently.”

For the first time since entering the room, even his voice lost its teasing edge.

“Raina and I understood each other too easily. There was comfort. Familiarity. Friendship.” He paused before glancing toward Sachin. “But this man...”

A small smile appeared on his face.

“This man challenged her. Frustrated her. Made her overthink. Made her feel things intensely. And people rarely fall in love with comfort first.”

He looked down at the cup in his hand.

“They fall in love with intensity.”

Zara stayed quiet after that.

Then Ishan added lightly, “Besides, your bhai may seem rigid to the world, but people like him make you feel safe in strange ways. His boundaries don’t look like restrictions when you love him.”

He glanced toward Sachin again.

“They look like certainty.”

“And certainty is attractive?” Zara asked softly.

“Very,” Ishan replied.

“Especially to someone whose mind is chaos.”

Later that evening, when the rain finally turned to drizzle, and Zara left, Sachin sat with his old carton again, just long enough to remind himself of the ache—and then put it back, gently, under the bed. A soldier’s ritual, not a lover’s.

Before surrendering to the quiet of the night, he opened his email once more—half out of routine, half out of a restlessness he couldn’t quite name. He told himself he was checking for late work updates, anything that might demand attention before morning.

The screen’s blue light washed over his weary face. A handful of unread messages blinked back at him—routine notices, casual forwards, nothing that couldn’t survive until dawn. Nothing urgent. Nothing that truly mattered.

### ***A Quiet Concern***

*I know you're busy, I know you're tied,  
With duties, with pressures you can't hide.  
But a small message, just a word or two,  
Would ease my heart — I'm missing you.  
I've shared this feeling many a time,  
Not to blame, nor accuse, nor to undermine,  
But simply to say —  
I care so much, I long for your presence, your warm touch.  
Sometimes I wonder — are you distant by choice,  
Or wrestling quietly, without a voice?  
Are there worries you carry, heavy and deep,  
That keep you from rest, from peaceful sleep?  
I wish I knew — or you'd let me in,  
To ease your struggles, thick or thin.  
All I want is for us to grow together,  
Stronger, wiser, come whatever.  
So please, if you can, spare just a moment today,  
To show me your love in your own way.  
Because I'm here, with an understanding heart,  
Hoping we're not growing further apart.*

On the corner of his desk lay a slender folder, its label neat and deliberate: “*Drafts – R.*”

Inside rested words that had never found their way into the world. Emails composed with care, sentences softened, apologies rewritten and rearranged. Some pages bore the quiet desperation of 2:17 a.m.—those fragile hours when courage briefly outweighs pride. Others were older, their ink carrying the patience of weeks, even months.

He lifted the folder and traced its edge with his thumb, as though it might answer him if he pressed hard enough. Every message ended the same way: paused, unsent, suspended in that narrow space between intention and action.

Subject: 1 Year, 3 Months, 9 Days

I’m doing okay, I think. I saw someone today who looked like you. She wasn’t. But for a second, my heart did that thing where it jumps without checking the landing.

I’m still waiting. But maybe I’ve confused waiting with not knowing how to stop loving.

Did you ever love me at all? Don’t answer. I wouldn’t believe it anyway.

He closed the tab. A slow breath escaped him.

Raina had never blocked him. But she’d stopped responding.

He remembered the day she told him, “I need space, Sachin. You feel like too much.”

And he’d smiled like a fool and said, “Okay. Take all the space you need. I’ll wait in the corner.”

He thought then that love meant patience. That loyalty was the noblest kind of suffering.

Tonight, he wasn't so sure.

Sachin finally lay down on his bed, the mattress dipping familiarly beneath him. The room was quiet in that fragile, late-night way when even the ceiling fan seems to lower its voice. A thin stripe of amber light from the streetlamp outside filtered in through the balcony door, cutting across the wall like a silent witness.

He lifted his hand toward the light, fingers bending and folding until a shadow-bird appeared against the pale paint. He adjusted his thumb for the beak, curved his knuckles for wings. The shape trembled slightly.

This time, both hands were his.

But once, one of those hands had always been Raina's.

They used to sit cross-legged on the sofa, whenever Raina visited his flat laughing when the bird came out lopsided. She would insist her hand made the better wing. He would argue that his made the sharper beak. Together, they perfected it—two shadows merging into one neat silhouette. He had named the bird *Raven*, said it was his, claimed it playfully like a secret only they shared.

Just like he had claimed her.

Now, the bird looked thinner. Incomplete. One wing stronger, the other pretending.

His fingers faltered. The shadow collapsed.

A tightness rose in his chest before he could reason with it. The kind that doesn't announce itself, just quietly fills the space behind the ribs. Tears slipped down without permission, tracing slow, warm paths toward his ears. He didn't sob. He didn't move. He simply stared at the faint glow on the wall, as if it might rearrange itself into something familiar.

After a moment, he separated his hands. The wall returned to being only a wall.

He wiped his cheeks with the back of his palm, breathing carefully—measured, controlled. The room felt larger now, emptier somehow, the shadows no longer playful but stretched and distant.

He let his arms fall to his sides and stayed still, eyes open, watching the streetlight flicker faintly through the balcony glass.

The bird was gone. The light remained. Tomorrow would bring Sameer. And another adjustment. And probably, Ishan's fury.

But that's what the flat had always been: a space constantly adapting—two bedrooms, four hearts, and a rotating guest list of unspoken feelings.

In preparation for Sameer's arrival, Ankusha had quietly shifted out to stay with a friend, saying with a soft smile, "I think you boys deserve some old-school catch-up. Besides, Sameer needs the space more than I need your second-hand coffee." She didn't say it, but her gesture wasn't lost on Sachin. There was grace in how she stepped back, the same kind of kindness that made her fit in without ever needing to push.

Sameer arrived on a Friday that smelled of rain and school canteens, dragging his duffle and a thumping Bluetooth speaker like some riotous parade of nostalgia. He didn't knock this time—he barged in mid-song, singing his own remix of *Papa Kehle Hain*, and declared, "Your saviour from monotony has returned!"

Sachin, seated at his working table in his oversized lavender puma t-shirt (the one gifted by Raina on one of his birthday, Puma because he loved it and lavender because she loved it) and laptop glasses, just raised a hand. "You have three minutes to reduce your volume or I call your mother."

Sameer dropped his bag and grinned. "My mother would thank you. I've been giving her existential crisis for years now."

Ishan emerged from the room rubbing his forehead. “Why does my sleep feel attacked already?”

Sameer clapped him on the back. “Because your sleep is too privileged. Bro, your bed’s still firmer than my career decisions.”

Sameer did not enter rooms. He arrived. Usually loudly. Usually off-key.

He was the kind of person who believed silence was a social problem that needed immediate fixing. If a space felt too still, he filled it—with music, commentary, exaggerated storytelling, or a dramatic recap of something that had not required drama in the first place. He called it “maintaining morale.” Everyone else called it “Sameer being Sameer.”

Sameer came from that familiar middle-class ecosystem where expectations were neatly ironed and placed at the foot of your bed every morning. Engineer, MBA, government job—preferably something that could be explained proudly at weddings. Instead, he carried around half-decided ambitions and fully committed enthusiasm. His career plans shifted more often than his playlists, but his confidence never did.

“Bro, clarity is overrated,” he once declared while opening a soda. “Confusion builds character.”

He thrived on performance. Not the fake kind—the survival kind. If he was anxious, he joked. If he was scared, he exaggerated. If he was hurt, he made it a punchline before anyone else could. Humor wasn’t just personality; it was armour polished daily. And yet, beneath the volume, there was precision.

Sameer remembered birthdays without reminders. He showed up without being asked. He knew exactly when to lower the music—though he’d always pretend he didn’t. He read a room faster than he ever let on. The theatrics were genuine, but so was the care behind them.

He loved nostalgia the way some people love oxygen. Old songs, old jokes, old stories retold with fresh exaggeration. For him, memory wasn't something to sit with quietly—it was something to relive at full volume. And if you ever asked him who he really was, he'd shrug and say something unserious like, "I'm the entertainment department," as though that explained everything and nothing at once.

Later that evening, the three boys sprawled across the living room floor, legs thrown carelessly over cushions, banana chips scattered between them, and drinks sweating onto the table — beer for Sameer, always; Coke for Sachin; and absolutely nothing for Ishan.

Their laughter rose easily, bouncing off the tiled walls, thick and unrestrained in the kind of comfort only years of friendship could create.

For Sameer, the beer had somehow become symbolic. He treated it less like a drink and more like a declaration of adulthood. Every single time he cracked open a can, he would lean back dramatically and announce, with unnecessary authority, that "the best of men acquire the taste of beer eventually." And without fail, he would glance at Sachin and Ishan with theatrical disappointment before adding, "I'm honestly ashamed watching you two drain your manhood like this."

Sachin would laugh every time but never touch the bottle.

What Sameer never fully understood was that Sachin's refusal had never really been about alcohol itself. Somewhere between years of distance and years of love, an unspoken pact had quietly formed between him and Raina — that the first proper drink either of them ever had would be together. It was childish perhaps, maybe even sentimental, but Sachin had held onto it with surprising sincerity.

And Ishan — Ishan always had an excuse.

Sometimes it was his stomach. Sometimes his medication. Sometimes his sleep cycle or some vague health issue he brushed off casually before stealing chips from everyone else's plate instead.

Nobody ever paid enough attention to it.

Mostly because Ishan never allowed them to.

He said everything lightly, like a joke halfway swallowed, and the others had learned long ago to laugh along with him rather than pause long enough to ask what he actually meant.

"Remember the Chemistry viva in Class 11?" Ishan managed between bites. "You told Ma'am that atoms are basically confused marbles."

Sameer's grin widened instantly. "And you said you feel like a neutron—always neutral, never involved!"

Sachin leaned back, shaking his head. "And somehow, both of you scored full marks. Life really does reward nonsense."

"Do you remember that time in Class 12," Sameer said, lying flat on the floor with his hands behind his head, "when I challenged you idiots to bunk Trivedi sir's chemistry class?"

Ishan immediately started laughing. "Correction—you challenged everyone. I was the only intelligent person who stayed back."

Sachin pointed at him. "Yeah, because you were Trivedi sir's favorite student."

"Favorite?" Ishan scoffed. "Bro, I was terrified of that man."

Sameer grinned. "Everyone was terrified of him."

And honestly, there was reason enough to be.

Trivedi sir was barely five-foot-four, completely bald except for a stubborn patch of hair above his ears, and had a deep dent right in the center of his forehead. A thick sutured scar ran from his left temple down to the corner of his eye.

There was an entire legend floating around school that he'd once survived a brutal accident, had a metal plate inside his skull now, and since then had permanently forgotten how to laugh. According to half the students, anger was the only emotion left in his system.

The scary part was—not a single person could prove the rumor wrong.

“Man used to enter the classroom already looking furious,” Sameer said. “Like someone personally offended him before first period.”

Sachin burst out laughing. “And that silence when he removed his glasses? Funeral atmosphere.”

“Still the best chemistry teacher in school though,” Ishan admitted. “Everybody attended his tuition after school.”

“That’s what made the bunk legendary,” Sameer said proudly. “Missing his school class was one thing. Missing the class of the same man who taught you tuition in the evening? That was basically volunteering for death.”

“And yet,” Sachin said dramatically, “four brave soldiers accepted the challenge.”

“Brave?” Ishan snorted. “You all just wanted to play basketball.”

Which was true.

The moment chemistry period started, Sachin, Sameer, and two others quietly slipped out from the back staircase and ran straight to the basketball court. What was supposed to be a quick ten-minute game somehow turned into a full match. Shirts drenched in sweat, screaming over fouls, arguing over scores—they completely forgot about the consequences waiting upstairs.

Meanwhile, Trivedi sir apparently conducted the entire class normally.

“That was the scary part,” Sameer admitted. “No peon searching for us. No public humiliation. Nothing.”

Sachin nodded slowly. “We genuinely thought we’d gotten away with it.”

“And then the bell rang,” Ishan said, already smiling because he knew what came next.

The four of them casually walked back toward the classroom, expecting it to be empty by then.

But Trivedi sir was still inside.

Not leaving.

Not packing up.

Just standing beside a desk, solving a doubt.

“For him,” Sameer said, pointing at Ishan.

Sachin groaned loudly. “Of course it was him.”

Ishan raised both hands defensively. “I had an actual doubt!”

“Traitor,” Sameer muttered.

The moment Trivedi sir looked up and saw the four of them standing at the door, the classroom temperature genuinely seemed to drop.

Nobody spoke for a second.

Then came that stare.

That terrifying, silent Trivedi sir stare.

“He knew immediately,” Sameer said. “Didn’t even ask where we were. He just knew.”

“And for once,” Ishan added, “Sameer started apologizing before sir could even speak.”

“Obviously,” Sameer defended himself. “I value my life.”

Sachin laughed. “Bro was acting like a saint. ‘Sorry sir, mistake happened sir, won’t happen again sir.’”

“Because unlike you,” Sameer shot back, “I had survival instincts.”

Everyone remembered what happened next.

Trivedi sir had finally spoken, voice low and dangerous, asking why they had bunked the class.

Sameer kept apologizing.

The other two stayed silent.

But Sachin—

Sachin decided to argue.

“To this day,” Ishan said, still amazed, “I don’t understand what confidence possessed you.”

Sachin grinned shamelessly. “I was making a logical point.”

“You told him bunking one class wasn’t a big deal,” Sameer said incredulously.

“And then,” Ishan continued, laughing harder now, “this genius said, ‘Sir, anyway this topic was already covered in tuition.’”

Sameer slapped the floor laughing. “I swear I saw Trivedi sir’s eye twitch.”

“He looked ready to vaporize all four of us,” Ishan said.

“And somehow,” Sachin added proudly, “he still didn’t do anything.”

That was the strangest part. No punishment. No note to parents. No suspension. No lecture from the principal.

The entire day, the four of them sat in absolute fear, expecting at any moment a peon would appear at the classroom door with: “Principal ma’am is calling you.”

Rumors had already spread through school by lunch break.

“People genuinely thought Sachin was getting expelled,” Sameer laughed.

“Honestly,” Ishan admitted, “I thought so too.”

Sachin stretched comfortably against the couch. “But nothing happened.”

“Nothing,” Sameer repeated. “That man scared us to death... and then simply let it go.”

Ishan smirked. “Maybe the metal plate cooled down.”

Sachin immediately laughed. “Or maybe even Trivedi sir realized basketball was more important than hydrocarbons.”

Sachin leaned back against the couch. “Honestly, half our school life was just people trying to escape tests.”

Sameer pointed at him. “Excuse me, you were the same. Every time homework was incomplete- ‘Ma’am, I left my notebook at home.’”

Sachin shrugged calmly. “It worked often enough.”

“That’s because teachers believed you,” Ishan said. “You had that sincere face.”

Sameer laughed. “Meanwhile if I said the same thing, they’d ask me to stand outside first and explain later.”

They all laughed again, the kind that came from remembering the small rebellions and ridiculous schemes of school days.

Then the laughter slowly settled.

There was a pause—comfortable, elastic.

Sameer suddenly sat up, as if a memory had just exploded in his mind.

“Oye, do you remember Darshana?” he announced dramatically.

Ishan raised an eyebrow. “Which Darshana?”

Sameer smirked. “The unbothered one. Milky skin, that short haircut she somehow managed to tie into a tiny ponytail... always walking around with that half-smirk like the world couldn’t touch her.”

Sachin let out a small laugh, already knowing where this was going.

Sameer shot him a teasing look and winked. “Yeah, *that* girl. The one our man here had given his heart to. Completely lost in her aura.”

Sachin pretended to laugh it off, shaking his head as if it were just another old joke. But somewhere inside, he knew it wasn’t entirely wrong. Long before Raina had ever entered his life, there had been Darshana.

Sameer leaned forward, suddenly curious. “Hey, what’s she doing now?”

Ishan thought for a moment. “Last I heard, she got into MBBS or something. Medicine, I think.”

Sameer nodded slowly, then took a sip from the can in his hand, watching the fizz settle along the sides.

“Speaking of survivors,” he said casually, “remember how everyone used to panic before English submissions?”

“Because no one actually understood the assignment,” Ishan replied with a quiet laugh.

Sachin smirked slightly.

“Except her.”

Sachin didn’t look up.

Sameer’s voice shifted, just slightly. “Remember Raina’s handwriting?”

Sachin’s fingers paused on the rim of his glass, almost imperceptibly.

“Like she dipped her pen in poetry,” Sameer went on.

“Yup,” Ishan nodded, slower now. “Even the teacher once said her notes looked like printouts. And she always had that one blue gel pen she never let anyone borrow.”

“She was just different,” Sameer added, softer now. “Didn’t talk much, but when she did—it felt like you wanted to keep listening.”

Sachin rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth betrayed him.

Inside, though, the pride lingered.

Because even now—after distance, after silence, after everything—  
he still felt quietly honored that once, they were together. Almost together.

Sameer leaned back again, the curiosity in him clearly not done yet.

“And what about Raina?” he asked, glancing at the two of them. “What is she doing these days?”

Ishan shrugged lightly. “Last time I checked, she was working at a pretty good position in one of those big MNCs.”

Sachin looked up almost immediately.

“She’s the Executive Head at Deloitte,” he corrected calmly.

Before in Bangalore, but now shifted to Hyderabad.

Ishan glanced at him for a second. He had tried to keep the answer vague, almost casual, but Sachin had stated it with quiet certainty.

There was no hesitation in his voice—only a subtle pride.

Sachin didn’t say anything further, but it was clear he kept track. And more than that, he seemed genuinely proud of how far Raina had come in her career.

Raina had been their schoolmate, just a friend back then. Reserved, but observant. She wasn’t the loudest voice in the class, but her presence was always felt. Like the quiet light of dawn—never drawing attention, but always touching everything. She had thick, unruly hair always tied in a messy

braid, and the kind of honesty in her eyes that made you wonder if she could see through you.

She and Sachin had barely exchanged more than polite classroom greetings over the years. Nothing beyond a nod, a brief smile, or the usual “notes mile?” before an exam.

Raina wasn’t someone who spoke much, but she was quietly dependable. She shared a strong bond with Ishan, especially because she had been the one who helped him settle in when he joined the school in Class 9. Interestingly, she too had joined the same school that year—just before the summer vacations—while Ishan arrived after them. Having already gone through the awkward phase of adjusting to new teachers, new classmates, and the unspoken hierarchies of a settled group, she understood what he must have been feeling.

They were in the same section, and she helped him catch up with the syllabus, even completing parts of his notebooks so he wouldn’t feel left behind. It wasn’t dramatic or loud kindness—just steady, practical support.

Over time, whispers began circulating in the corridors. People assumed they were together. Ishan never corrected the rumor. In fact, a part of him enjoyed it. It felt flattering, convenient—something that gave him a quiet sense of importance. Raina, however, remained completely unaware that her simple gestures had been interpreted as something more.

Sachin, observing from a distance, almost accepted the rumor as truth. And that silent assumption along with his heart beating for Darshana then, became reason enough for him to keep his distance.

Even though, for reasons he never fully admitted to himself, Raina’s presence had always carried a strange sense of calm for him—a stillness he didn’t quite know how to approach, let alone claim.

Now, years later, her name still lingered in rooms like this. Unfinished. Unclaimed. Unforgotten.

*You will never truly know about Raina.*

*Not how she came into Sachin's life,  
not how love unfurled between them—  
whether it was loud like spring rain,  
or quiet like dust gathering on an untouched diary.*

*You won't know the moment they drifted apart either—  
if it was a storm, or just the silence that grew too large between words.*

*Because Sachin never spoke of her.  
Not in detail. Not in fragments.  
Not even when the nights got too long and his smile wore thin at the corners.*

*And no one else dared to fill in the blanks.  
Not Sameer, not Ishan, not even Zara—  
because it wasn't just a heartbreak he was carrying.  
It was something more sacred. More sealed.*

*She wasn't a memory to be shared—she was a sanctum he guarded.  
As if speaking her name too much might erode its truth.  
As if reducing her to stories might steal away the realness she once breathed into his  
days.*

*So you won't know what shade of laughter she had,  
or what part of her smile made Sachin stop mid-sentence.  
You won't know the songs they shared, the places they promised, or the words that  
broke it all open.*

*All you'll ever know is that his messy hair remains that way for her—  
because only she was ever allowed to say it suited him.*

*And now, even in her absence,  
Sachin wears silence like a vow.*

*Not of forgetting.  
But of never letting the world touch what was once his and hers alone.*

Ishan, with that perfect timing of his, chimed in, “Okay, now that we’ve made peace with our collective childhood and all our long-lost memories—who’s going to wash the dishes?”

Sachin threw a cushion at him. Sameer kicked the chips packet across the floor in protest.

And just like that, the air shifted again—from memory to mischief, from quiet ache to loud comfort.

Somewhere between the second round of drinks only for sameer and the exaggerated retelling of school disasters, Sameer leaned back against the sofa and said casually, “Sachin, let’s buy a bike.”

It was said lightly, almost like a joke tossed into the room. But it lingered.

Technically, it would be Sachin’s purchase. His money. His name on the papers. Yet the way Sameer said it made it feel shared—as if the bike would belong to all three of them. As if it would carry Ishan’s directions, Sameer’s playlists, and Sachin’s silence on late-night rides. Not ownership, but belonging.

Sachin didn’t respond immediately. He just smirked, shook his head—but something inside him had already started considering it.

The night stretched on. The flat buzzed with the kind of energy only history can create. Stories spilled out—corridor gossip from school days, that infamous time Sameer got caught sneaking out during exams. With every retelling, the details grew louder, funnier, more absurd as midnight slipped into early morning.

They didn’t say it aloud, but they all felt it:

Some people leave.

Some people stay.

And some nights remind you why you’ve made peace with both.

## 6

The next morning, the flat breathed a familiar kind of quiet again.

Sameer had left after giving his “best shot” at the exam he barely pretended to take seriously. He packed with his usual theatrics—mocking Ishan’s flat-discipline rules, saluting the sink, and staging a dramatic farewell at the door.

“Bro, this flat will miss my legendary presence,” he declared, handing Sachin his half-finished jar of peanut butter like it was an heirloom.

And then he was gone.

Now it was just the two of them again—Sachin and Ishan.

Back to their usual chaos, stripped of temporary distractions.

Bills clung to the fridge door with expired magnets. Groceries were a gamble. And the biggest debate of the day often revolved around whose turn it was to cook.

“Bhai, I made Maggi last night,” Ishan argued from his room.

“Exactly. You made two packets and ate both,” Sachin shot back, sprawled across his bed, eyes half-glued to his screen. “That doesn’t count as ‘for us.’ That’s selfish behaviour.”

“Then starve. Good for detox.”

Silence followed—until a loud Instagram reel blasted from Sachin’s phone.

“Bhai!” Ishan shouted. “Why are you getting F1 memes in your feed? What are you even doing with your life?”

“Better than those emotional poetry reels you pretend to hate but scroll through with tears.”

“I do not cry.”

“You snort like a goat when they hit too hard.”

“Chal jhootha!”

They both laughed, too lazy to continue the mock war.

Around noon, the doorbell rang.

They ignored it.

It rang again.

Sachin dragged himself up and opened the door—only to find Sameer standing there with his backpack slung over one shoulder and a grin wide enough to start trouble.

“Missed me already?” he said, pushing past them as if he’d never left.

“You—what?” Ishan blinked.

“Exam khatam. Train cancel. Destiny wanted me back,” Sameer shrugged dramatically.

The quiet shattered again.

By evening, the three of them stepped out for proper food—something better than Maggi diplomacy. The streets were buzzing, the air still warm, conversations overlapping as always. They were mid-argument about butter chicken versus biryani when they passed a bike showroom.

All three slowed down.

They looked at each other.

And without a word, Sameer stormed inside.

The showroom lights reflected off polished fuel tanks and chrome details. Sameer walked straight toward a bike like he owned the place.

“Bhai, this one,” he announced, tapping the seat. “This is it.”

Sachin laughed. “You paying?”

Sameer ignored him and turned to the salesperson. “Full details, please. Mileage, engine specs, top speed, color options. And EMI plans—proper breakdown.”

Ishan stood slightly behind them, unusually quiet. He knew the reality. Buying a bike wasn’t a joke decision. Money didn’t stretch infinitely.

But Sameer had already begun his pitch.

“Sachin, listen to me,” he said, serious for once. “You’re tall. Built like you’re supposed to own a machine like this. And you’re still auto-ing around like a school kid. Boyhood waste kar raha hai. A man needs a bike. Night rides. Random drives. Escape button. You need this.”

Sachin tried to brush it off, but something in him stirred.

Sameer continued, relentless. “EMI hai. Not like you’re paying in one go. Manageable. You work hard. At least ride hard.”

The salesperson sensed momentum and explained everything—engine capacity, road presence, installment options. Numbers were scribbled. Calculations made.

Ishan finally spoke, quietly. “If you’re doing this... do it properly. No regrets later.”

Sachin looked at the bike again. It suited him—tall frame, muscular body, solid stance. It didn’t look flashy. It looked steady.

An hour later, paperwork was signed.

By the time they stepped out, the showroom staff handed over the keys.

They rode to dinner first—because priorities.

Food tasted better that night. Laughter came easier. And when they returned to the flat, parking a brand-new bike downstairs, something felt different.

The FZ stood under the yellow parking light like it had been carved out of metal and shadow — metallic black body catching dull reflections, sharp edges running along the frame like folded blades. And at the front, that fierce red glow burned through the dark, low and steady, like the eyes of some street beast waiting to be unleashed onto the road.

Sachin swung a leg off it casually, helmet tucked beneath one arm, but the bike somehow made him look sharper too — taller, cleaner, more dangerous in that quiet way confidence works on a man. The machine suited him irritatingly well. Like it had been designed with him in mind.

Ishan whistled dramatically. “Bhai, this is unfair. Some people are just born for cinematic entries.”

But Sameer only stared at the bike for a second longer, a slow grin spreading across his face.

“No, no,” he said, shaking his head. “Cherry on the cake is too soft for this.”

He walked around the bike once like a man appreciating art. Or violence. Maybe both.

“This,” he declared, pointing at Sachin leaning against the metallic-black beast, “is whiskey on ice. No water. Neat. Strong. The kind you hate when you taste it the first time because it burns your throat and bruises your ego.”

Sachin laughed. “What does that even mean?”

“It means,” Sameer continued with absolute seriousness, “children like sweetness. Men learn to appreciate things with bite. Loud bikes, sleepless drives, black coffee, beer, whiskey, heartbreak — acquired tastes.”

Ishan groaned. “Here he goes again with his philosophy after one beer.”

But Sameer ignored him, still admiring the bike.

“Look at this thing,” he muttered. “Sharp body, beast headlights, matte black finish... and then this idiot sitting on top of it like some hero in a coming-of-age movie. Dangerous combination.”

Sachin rolled his eyes, though the corner of his mouth betrayed him.

Sameer pointed at him again. “Exactly that expression. That’s the whiskey part.”

Upstairs, Sachin placed the keys on the table.

The three of them stared at it for a second. Then burst out laughing. What an evening it had been.

The three of them had crashed early that night, exhaustion and excitement finally catching up after hours of food, laughter, and endless admiration for the new bike parked downstairs.



The flat had gone quiet. One room fan creaked lazily. A distant dog barked somewhere outside.

And the city of Bangalore slept under that strange blue silence that only exists between 2 and 4 a.m.

Then suddenly— “Get up.”

A hand shook Sachin’s shoulder aggressively.

“Bhai. Uth.”

Sachin opened one eye with visible irritation. “What?”

Sameer stood over him, hair a mess, eyes shining with dangerous enthusiasm. “We bought a beast and parked it downstairs like an Acura. This is disrespectful.” Sachin blinked twice. Sameer leaned closer.

“Let’s go to Leh-Ladakh.”

Ishan groaned without even opening his eyes. “Go to hell first. Ladakh later.”

Sameer ignored him completely. “Think about it,” he whispered dramatically. “Empty highways. Mountains. Brotherhood. Near-death experiences. Men are built for this.”

Sachin rubbed his face and sat up slowly. “Leh-Ladakh in the middle of the night?”

“Yes.”

“We both have jobs.” “Temporary problem.” “We have no luggage.” “Character development doesn’t wait for luggage.”

From the floor came another sleepy mutter from Ishan. “If both of you die, don’t haunt the flat...”

Sachin stared at Sameer for a few seconds. Then suddenly laughed under his breath.

“Ladakh is madness,” he said. “But...” A pause.

“Coorg?”

Sameer’s eyes widened instantly. “Done.”

And just like that, at three in the morning, the trip was born.

The flat transformed into chaos within minutes. Sameer threw random clothes into a backpack with absolutely no system whatsoever — one t-shirt, deodorant, chargers, two

packets of chips, sunglasses for no reason, and somehow a steel spoon.

Sachin, on the other hand, packed with military precision. Phone charger. Wallet. Power bank. Bike papers. Medicines. Extra gloves. Rain cover.

Then, sitting at the dining table under dim yellow light, he opened his laptop and typed a leave mail to office claiming food poisoning. Professional. Polite. Completely fabricated. After that came the real responsibility.

Ishan.

Sachin opened WhatsApp and sent him a ridiculously detailed message:

- Don't let Zara into my room because she'll "borrow" hoodies permanently.
- If Zara asks where we went, say "long ride nearby," not "midnight impulsive identity crisis."
- Water the plant near the balcony.
- And for God's sake, don't tell Mom.

He stared at the screen after sending it. Then quietly added one more line. "Miss us, idiot."

-----:))-----

The basement was pitch dark when they finally walked downstairs. Cold early-morning air lingered in the concrete parking space. Their footsteps echoed softly. And there she stood.

The FZ.

Metallic black body resting under pale tube lights, red front LEDs glowing like the narrowed eyes of some nocturnal predator. The sharp tank edges reflected silver streaks across

the darkness. The engine looked alive even while standing still. Waiting.

Sachin slid on his gloves slowly. Black roadster leather jacket. Matching riding trousers. Brand-new Puma shoes still too clean for the road.

And beside him stood Sameer — in loose cartoon-print pyjamas, borrowed oversized t-shirt of Ishan, and bathroom slippers. Sachin looked at him once. “People spend lakhs looking cool on bikes.”

Sameer shrugged. “Aura can’t be purchased.”

The ignition clicked. Then came that deep growl. Not noise. Presence. The bike vibrated beneath them like restrained energy. And the city opened ahead. The Bangalore roads were almost empty at that hour. Streetlights streaked past them in gold flashes. The cold wind hit Sachin’s face through the helmet visor. Music blasted low from Sameer’s phone stuffed inside the jacket pocket. Old Hindi songs. Random English rock. Arijit. Kishore Kumar. Everything mixed together with the roar of the engine. The highway stretched endlessly ahead — dark, clean, hypnotic. At first they spoke loudly over the wind. Then less. Then not at all. Because some journeys stop needing conversation after a point. They switched riders every few hours. Sameer rode recklessly with laughter.

Sachin rode like a man possessed. Smooth. Focused. Hungry.

The route stretched for hundreds of kilometres — Bangalore to Coorg and beyond the surrounding ghats, through mist-covered roads, sleeping towns, roadside tea stalls opening before sunrise, and forests that smelled of rain and wet soil. At one point they stopped near a tiny chai stall where truck drivers stood wrapped in shawls holding steel glasses of boiling tea. Sameer looked half dead from sleep deprivation.

Sachin looked strangely alive. And that was the moment he realized it.

Not suddenly. Not dramatically. But slowly. Quietly. Like numbness wearing off.

For months, he had been shrinking himself into somebody else's version of love. Carefully measured words. Careful reactions. Careful expectations. Raina had occupied so much emotional space inside him that he had forgotten what silence without her felt like.

But on that highway — with cold air cutting across his face and exhaustion in his bones and freedom roaring beneath him — he understood something ugly. Her love had not broken him. The waiting had. Every promise. Every reassurance. Every beautifully decorated emotion that eventually turned hollow. It all suddenly looked ornamental. Pretty wrapping paper around emptiness. And strangely... the realization did not destroy him. It released him. Because somewhere between speeding through dark highways and laughing at 5 a.m. over terrible chai, Sachin had found the version of himself he had misplaced.

The boy who loved movement. Noise. Adventure. Spontaneous decisions.

Road trips with no plans. Wind against his skin. The feeling of becoming weightless for a few hours. He had missed himself.

Later, while riding behind Sameer, Sachin took out his phone briefly and clicked a photo of a truck moving ahead of them through the misty dawn. The truck had hand-painted lines behind it in faded colors:

“Adventure Awaits.”

“Sher Se Panga Nahi.”

And beneath it, the line that held his gaze longer than expected:

“Giri Shabnam bane moti, koi zaalim aa ke tod gaya...  
Uss bewafa se kya milna, jo dil laga ke chhod gaya.”

He posted it on his story without caption. No explanation needed. Because for the first time in months, the sadness inside him no longer felt like drowning. It felt like distance. And distance, he realized while the bike cut through the morning fog, could finally be crossed.



## **Sedation**

*I feel sedated  
by the pain you left inside me—  
as if grief itself slipped into my veins slowly, silently,  
until my body forgot how to resist.*

*This traumatic trance I live in now is the aftermath  
of loving you not carefully, not halfway, but madly—  
with the kind of devotion  
that blinds a person  
before it destroys them.*

*And now that everything is over,  
I sit here feeling foolish enough  
to still glance at doors, still pause at notifications,  
still nurture the dying hope that maybe— somehow—  
you will come back.*

*That is what love does.*

*It does not merely hurt you.  
It dismantles you gently,  
piece by piece,  
until you no longer recognise  
the person standing in your own reflection.*

*And I—*

*I am terribly ruined.  
Pathetically ruined.  
Ruined in every possible language  
a heart can understand.*

*Not wounded enough to die,  
not healed enough to live normally— just existing  
like a building after a fire,  
still standing somehow,  
but hollow from the inside.*

By the time they returned to Bangalore the next night, exhausted and smelling of petrol, dust, coffee, and highway wind, the city looked the same.

Back at the flat, Ishan was surprisingly unbothered by the fact that he had missed the trip entirely. Honestly, even if they had dragged him awake properly in broad daylight, explained the route, shown him the sunrise pictures and promised café stops every fifty kilometres, he still would have refused. Especially the bike part.

To Ishan, voluntarily sitting for hundreds of kilometres on a speeding machine with no back support, unpredictable weather, aching knees and Sameer's driving involved sounded less like adventure and more like a medically sponsored disaster. So, when the two of them finally returned, exhausted and dusty, he merely looked up from his laptop on the dining table and said calmly,

“Ah. The unemployed bikers return.”

The flat smelled faintly of room freshener, instant noodles and the coffee Ishan had probably reheated three times while working. Sunlight spilled warmly through the balcony curtains, turning the whole living room golden and lazy.

Sameer entered first like a victorious soldier returning from war. “BRO.” He threw his backpack dramatically onto the couch. “You have NO idea what you missed.”

Ishan didn't even look up properly. “I have a very strong idea, actually. Back pain.”

Sameer ignored him and continued at full volume anyway. “The way I took those ghats—”

“Hmm.”

“—brother, people were literally staring.”

“Probably in fear.”

“I leaned into turns like MotoGP riders.”

“You wear bathroom slippers while riding. Please stop comparing yourself to athletes.”

Sameer gasped in offence. “Aura compensates for equipment.”

And just like that, the storytelling began.

He narrated every overtaking sequence like battlefield heroics. Every tea stop became an emotional documentary. Every speed burst was retold with such exaggeration that even the laws of physics would have objected.

“At one point,” Sameer declared, standing in the middle of the living room demonstrating imaginary handlebars, “the bike and I became one.”

Ishan deadpanned, “Tragic.”

Meanwhile, Sachin had quietly disappeared into his room with a small tired smile.

The shower washed away layers of dust, sweat, highway wind and petrol smell still clinging to him. Hot water ran down his shoulders while his body slowly came down from the strange high the trip had left behind. But even standing there under the shower, eyes closed, he could still feel phantom sensations — the vibration of the bike beneath him, cold morning air against his gloves, the blur of highway lights. Some journeys stayed inside the muscles even after ending.

A few minutes later, he stepped out wearing loose grey lowers and an old black t-shirt, hair still damp. The flat felt quieter from this side of the chaos. Softer. Familiar again. He made himself coffee slowly. The kettle hissed softly. Coffee powder dissolved into dark brown swirls. Steam curled upward lazily.

Then he poured it into that old ceramic mug with the faded golden rim near the edges — slightly chipped, slightly worn out, but still his favorite. The kind of cup that had survived years, shifting flats, and late-night deadlines.

He sank into the bean bag near the balcony, stretching his legs out with a long exhale. From the other room, Sameer's voice still echoed nonstop. "Then I accelerated., "And BRO the pickup—"

He took another sip, opened his phone absentmindedly and clicked on his story. Mostly out of habit.

The truck picture appeared again. The misty road. The painted lines. The shayari. And below it, the viewers list. His thumb stopped moving.

Raina.

For one second, his heartbeat stumbled so sharply it almost irritated him. He checked the timing immediately. Seen 23h ago. Which meant she had seen it almost immediately after he had posted it during the ride. Something hot and restless rushed through him all over again. Not the calm freedom from the highway. Something sharper. More dangerous. Familiar. Adrenaline climbed into his chest instantly. He told himself it was the caffeine. The coffee was strong. He had barely slept. His body was exhausted.

But deep down, he knew exactly what had caused it. Her name.

And worse — the fact that she had seen those lines.

"Uss bewafa se kya milna..."

Suddenly the story felt embarrassingly exposed. Too emotional. Too obvious. Like he had accidentally opened a wound publicly and only realized later that someone important had watched him bleed.

What must she have thought? Did she understand it was about her? Did she feel guilty? Did she laugh? Did it hurt her?

The thoughts came too fast.

Sachin frowned at himself immediately, annoyed by how easily one name could still dismantle the peace he had spent an entire highway reclaiming. Ashamed of his own reaction,

he gulped down the remaining hot coffee in one reckless sip, burning his throat slightly in the process. Then, needing distraction more than anything else, he got up and walked back toward the living room.

Big mistake.

Sameer was somehow still talking.

“...and then the truck guy himself gave me side because he knew talent when he saw it.”

Ishan looked seconds away from spiritual collapse. Slouched on the couch with dead eyes and laptop still open, he spotted Sachin entering and immediately pointed dramatically toward him like a hostage spotting rescue forces.

“Sachin.”

His voice carried genuine desperation.

“Thank God.”

Sameer paused mid-sentence.

Ishan sat upright instantly.

“Please take this man away from me. My ears are bleeding internally.”

Sameer looked offended. “You’re jealous because you don’t understand biker culture.”

“I understand enough,” Ishan replied flatly. “Two idiots disappeared overnight and came back speaking like retired army veterans after one road trip.”

Sachin laughed quietly despite himself.

Ishan pointed accusingly at Sameer again. “For the last forty-five minutes he has explained every turn individually. Every turn, Sachin.”

“Because every turn had emotion.”

“Every turn had potholes.”

Sameer threw a cushion at him.

And as their voices filled the flat again — stupid, loud, familiar — Sachin leaned back against the doorway for a second, watching them.

And then the call from home came.

It wasn't dramatic. No shouting. No panic. Just that steady, unmistakable tone his father used when a situation had already crossed the point of casual discussion.

"You need to come back. It's about the property. It's getting complicated."

There was a pause after that sentence—the kind that carries history inside it. Papers rustling in the background. A muffled voice. The ceiling fan humming over the line.

Sachin stared at the wall for a few seconds after the call ended.

"I think I need to go home," Sachin said, stepping out the doorway.

Even Sachin was confused, his father demanding his presence for property related issue.

Ishan looked up immediately. "Now-now? Or dramatic 'I'll think about it' now?"

"Now-now."

The teasing faded.

Within minutes, the room changed tempo. Sameer pulled out his phone to check train availability. Ishan cleared space on the bed so Sachin could open his suitcase.

"Flights are insane," Sameer muttered. "Tatkal train maybe. Or early morning one."

Sachin logged into the railway app, refreshing repeatedly, watching seats disappear in real time. Waiting list. RAC. One available seat in a 3AC coach leaving at 5:40 a.m. He booked it before overthinking could interfere.

Confirmation message. PNR saved. Screenshot sent to the family group.

Back in his room, he packed with the distracted efficiency of someone who doesn't fully know how long he'll be gone. Two formal shirts—just in case online meetings turned serious in his office. A pair of worn T-shirts for sleeping. Laptop charger. Extra extension cord. His office ID card.

He paused, then added his noise-cancelling headphones.

"I'll have to take calls from there," he said half to himself. "Quarter-end reviews this week."

Ishan leaned against the cupboard. "Yeah, because family property disputes are best handled alongside performance targets."

Sachin gave a tired smile.

He emailed his manager: *Working remotely for a few days. Family matter. Will be available on calls.* He set an out-of-office reply, but softened it—no details, just "limited bandwidth, reachable on phone."

By midnight, his suitcase was zipped. Laptop bag ready. Alarm set for 3:45 a.m.

The three of them sat quietly for a few minutes after that. No music. No jokes. Just the hum of the fridge and the weight of unfinished conversations.

At 4:30 a.m., Sachin insisted Ishan to drop him at the station with the new bike, Ishan refused that he is scared of riding bikes, Sameer pitched in and dropped him at the station.

Platform lights flickered against half-sleeping faces. Vendors poured cutting chai into paper cups. The train rolled in with metallic indifference.

"Text when you reach," Sameer said.

"I will."

"Even if it's just to complain about the weather there."

Sachin nodded, climbing into the coach, suitcase dragging behind him.

As the train pulled away, he watched the platform blur—and with it, the easy rhythm of shared living rooms and sarcastic jabs.

By the time he reached home, the discussions had already begun. And within hours, he was seated at the dining table—property papers spread out on one side, laptop open on the other, office notifications blinking quietly in the corner of the screen.

What began as a discussion about land and signatures quickly cracked open older fault lines. Inheritance turned into accusation. Logistics blurred into long-held grievances. The property was just the trigger; the wounds had been waiting for an audience.

Zara, who was already home, unsurprisingly, had taken on the role of reluctant mediator. She rolled her eyes through the theatrics, called out hypocrisy with surgical precision, and refused to let selective memory rewrite history. If there was sanity in the room, it usually came in her voice.

They barely found a minute alone. A day went by with odd silence but still very much occupied.

The next morning, though, they escaped briefly to the backyard. The old swing creaked under their combined weight as they sipped chai that was far too sweet, the kind made in a rush but served with expectation. For a moment, the house felt distant.

Then Sachin felt it—that small, inexplicable tug in his chest.

Something was off.

The backyard felt too still that morning. The swing creaked gently under Sachin's weight, sunlight falling in uneven patches across the cracked cement floor.

Inside the house, voices rose and fell in sharp waves—chachu debating numbers, someone insisting on “principles,”

someone else revisiting things that had nothing to do with property at all.

Sachin checked his phone.

A message from Sameer blinked at the top of his screen. It was classic Sameer. A dramatic goodbye, officially handing over all “flat responsibilities” to Ishan, and a promise to return next month to haunt them in another round. A laughing emoji. A threat disguised as affection.

Sachin smiled faintly.

But there was nothing from Ishan.

No random meme dropped without context. No sarcastic commentary about the rising electricity bill. No blurry picture of burnt Maggi with an over-the-top tragic caption.

Nothing.

The silence felt louder than it should have.

An entire day of silence from someone who once live-tweeted stepping into wet mop water.

He opened their chat.

Last message from Sachin: “Boarding. Don’t let the dishes unionize.”

Double ticked, blue ticked but no reply.

After that—emptiness.

He refreshed the screen. Switched between Wi-Fi and data. Even checked if he’d been muted by mistake.

Nothing.

He opened the food delivery app on instinct. Ishan’s account was still logged in on his phone from the last time they ordered together. No recent orders. Not yesterday. Not the day before.

He checked the grocery app. No transactions.

His jaw tightened.

He tapped Zara's shoulder lightly. "Did Ishan text you?"

She shook her head, still stirring her chai. "Nope. But it's Ishan. Maybe he's doing one of those dramatic 'I'm offline, I'm healing' phases."

Sachin didn't smile.

He stood up abruptly, the swing jolting backward. "I think something is off. I need to leave."

Zara frowned mid-sip. "Leaving as in... Bangalore?"

"Yeah." His voice was steady now, decision already made. "His phone's unreachable. Calls go straight to not reachable. He hasn't ordered food in 48 hours. And he never ignores messages like this. Not from both of us."

Inside the house, someone called his name, asking him to review a document.

For the first time in these days, the property felt irrelevant.

Zara's expression softened immediately. "Wait. I'll come with you."

Sachin shook his head.

"Stay. They'll combust without you here. At least you can keep the peace."

She exhaled sharply, already knowing he was right.

"Fine. But you better text me the moment you reach."

He didn't say yes.

He couldn't promise that. His mind was already elsewhere—calculating flights, checking train schedules, wondering if he still had the spare key to the flat in his laptop bag.

Within minutes, he was in his room, pulling out the half-unpacked suitcase he'd only just emptied few hours ago. Laptop. Charger. Two shirts. No careful folding this time.

He booked the first available flight—ridiculously expensive, but fast.

At the flat, miles away, Ishan's unwashed dishes still sat in the sink. The curtains were drawn. His phone lay face down on the table, battery long drained, the apartment quieter than it had ever been.

And Sachin, boarding his flight, had the same thought looping in his head—

Please let me be overreacting.

Sachin reached the society gate well past midnight—after hours of travel that felt longer than they were. Airport queues. A delayed cab. Traffic lights that seemed deliberately unhurried. His mind had been loud the entire way, but his body moved in silence.

The security guard looked up, mildly surprised, and lifted the barrier without a word.

And then, just as Sachin stepped inside, he heard a familiar voice.

“Arre? You at this hour?”

He turned. Nikhil.

Of all people.

They hadn't planned friendship. It had happened in fragments—on weekday mornings at the traveller pickup point near the main road. Back when neither of them owned a vehicle, both of them chasing office hours and discounted monthly passes.

They used to stand under the same crooked electric pole at 8:20 a.m., waiting for the white traveller van that was always five minutes late. At first, it was just polite nods. Then shared eye-rolls when the driver tried squeezing in “just one more passenger.” Then casual conversation.

Which department? Which project? Which tea stall near the office was least disappointing?

Over weeks, small talk stretched into longer discussions. Market trends. Salary negotiations. Mutual complaints about rising rent. Nikhil once suggested putting some money into a mid-cap stock he was tracking. Sachin countered with safer index funds. Soon they were exchanging articles, screenshots, even debating IPOs during traffic jams.

When Nikhil mentioned his wife was expecting, the conversations shifted. Safety. Stability. School zones. Car models.

A month later, he showed up not at the pickup point—but driving past it, sheepishly honking.

“Had to upgrade,” he’d grinned. “Baby coming. Can’t risk traveller acrobatics anymore.”

Sachin had laughed, waved, and continued waiting for the van. He told himself he’d buy a car eventually. Just not yet.

Now here they were again—at the society gate, years of routine folded into a single unexpected reunion.

“You shifted back?” Nikhil asked, adjusting his car keys.

“Just got in,” Sachin replied, forcing steadiness into his voice.

Nikhil studied him for a second. “Everything okay?”

Sachin hesitated.

“Yeah,” he said finally. “Just checking on someone.”

Nikhil nodded, not pushing further. “Call if you need anything. Kid’s almost one—you’ll hear her before you see her.”

For a brief second, the ordinary rhythm of life—the commuter past, the baby milestones, the upgrade from shared vans to personal cars—felt grounding.

Sachin raced the car through dim streets and traffic that refused to move fast enough. Then Sachin looked up at his building. Third floor. One balcony light off.

And the silence rushed back in.

The building elevator felt too slow. Every second clanged against his chest like a ticking warning.

Inside the flat, darkness greeted him. Not eerie. Just empty. But something told him to hurry.

He pushed Ishan's room door open—and there he was.

# 7

Curled under a blanket, flushed with fever, and visibly disoriented.

“Ishan!” Sachin rushed to him, touching his forehead. Boiling hot.

The room smelled of sweat, medicine, and neglected meals. A plate of untouched khichdi sat cold on the table.

In that moment, everything moved on instinct. Sachin propped Ishan up gently, his limbs limp and warm. Somehow managed to dress him, whispering half-assurances to a half-conscious man. He carried him out and down the stairs, throwing gratitude to Nikhil before driving to the nearest hospital.

At the emergency ward, it took time—time that felt like betrayal. Ishan was taken in. Monitors beeped. Nurses moved fast. But the doctor’s face stayed unreadable.

“Diagnosis isn’t confirmed,” the senior physician finally said. “But from the symptoms and history your friend vaguely murmured... it might be a resurfacing of an old injury. Possibly nerve-related. We’ll run imaging, but it could explain the sudden fever, pain, and blackout episodes.”

Sachin stood still.

Old injury?

He tried to connect dots but found none.

Later, sitting outside the ward, he finally messaged Zara.

“At the hospital. Not a simple fever. They’re checking for something serious. Old injury might be flaring up. He’s stable for now.”

The typing dots blinked for too long before her reply came.

“Shit. I knew something was wrong. Keep me updated. And make sure he drinks water if he wakes up. Tell him I’m going to throw my slipper across the state when I see him.”

Sachin didn’t smile. Not yet.

That night, he sat beside Ishan’s bed. The soft whirr of machines kept rhythm with his breath. He reached for Ishan’s hand once, then stopped. Instead, he spoke lowly:

“You idiot. You absolute idiot. You could’ve just told me.”

No response.

Only the blinking light of the heart monitor.

By morning, Zara’s tenth message had buzzed in. Doctors had confirmed further tests were required. It wasn’t life-threatening, but it wasn’t mild either.

Sachin hadn’t eaten. He sat at the café across the hospital, sipping bitter coffee.

His phone lit up.

Zara: He’s going to be okay, Sachin. You always find a way to fix things. But don’t forget to breathe too, alright? I know you — you’ll forget. Also, ask Ishan if the universe punished him because he mocked my Netflix recommendations last week. I’m serious. That man has karma pending.

Sachin finally smiled. Just a little.

And it stayed, like a promise — that they’d get through this too, together.

Back at home, the air had a different kind of weight to it.

It wasn't the heaviness of monsoon clouds or the hush before a thunderstorm — it was a silence that settled into the walls, like something unsaid was always watching.

Zara sat cross-legged on the floor of their father's study, rummaging through old papers while trying to find the land registration documents that Maa had asked for. The dispute over selling their ancestral home had flared up again — Chachu wanted it sold, claiming maintenance costs were pointless now that no one lived there full-time. Maa, ever the diplomat, stayed in the middle. Baba, as always, said very little.

The house in question — was nothing short of sprawling. A red sandstone courtyard greeted anyone who entered, with arched verandahs running all around. Creepers climbed the old stone pillars, and time had tattooed the walls with its own art — moss stains, cracks, and fading engravings.

There were rooms upon rooms, most of them locked now. The kitchen still held brass utensils blackened by memory. A tulsi plant stood in the centre of the courtyard in an old terracotta pot, surrounded by marigolds that bloomed even in neglect. The backyard was wild but alive — guava, mango, neem, and tamarind trees stood like quiet sentinels.

And every time Sachin came home, he found his way to the garden before he did anything else. He'd change into an old kurta, grab the metal watering can, and begin — one tree at a time. He knew each of them, as if they were extensions of his past. The lemon tree that bore fruit in winters, the jasmine vine and so much more.

He trimmed, watered, and spoke to them sometimes — words he couldn't say aloud to people.

One of his earliest memories was watching his baba prune the hibiscus bush near the well. "A tree never shouts," he used to say. "It shows up quietly, and gives, even when forgotten."

That's what Sachin had always remembered. And maybe that's what made the current family conflict hurt more than it should. The property wasn't just land. It was living memory.

But the others didn't see it like that. Chachu called it "unproductive space." Cousins debated over square footage and government rates. Someone even suggested demolishing the old section to build a homestay.

Zara had stormed out when she heard that last one. "This isn't a listing on Air BnB, it's the soil our childhood grew in!"

Baba didn't argue. He never did. He just said, "Do what feels right when I'm not here."

Back at the hospital, Sachin sat beside Ishan's bed, his eyes flickering between the slow beeping of the heart monitor and the IV drip rhythmically releasing drops into his friend's arm. The room was sterile, white, and filled with that cold, metallic quiet of uncertainty. Ishan looked like a cracked version of himself—pale, unmoving, the spark gone from his ever-commenting mouth.

Sachin hadn't left his side since the moment the nurse mentioned the words "neurological concern."

He'd already called, Ishan's younger brother. Carefully. Gently.

"Don't tell Auntie and Uncle right now," he had said, pressing his voice low, measured. "Ishan has a fever. It got worse. They're doing some tests. He's stable, but... the doctors are trying to understand what caused this. Something related to an old injury maybe. But he never told me anything about it."

There was a pause on the other side of the line, and then Amit whispered, "I think I know what this is about."

He promised to call back in a minute.

A WhatsApp notification blinked. A PDF file. It was from few years ago. Max Super Speciality Hospital – Neurology Department.

Sachin opened it, his eyes tracing the scan reports, prescription tables, and that one diagnosis line: Post-traumatic subarachnoid bleeding, mild spinal fluid blockage, trauma-induced neural hypersensitivity.

The phone rang again. Amit. His voice was a hush of emotion, carrying weight he hadn't touched in years.

"It happened in his first year of B.Tech," he began, "he never told many people. Not even most of his college friends."

Sachin didn't interrupt. He listened.

"He was on his way back from a coding competition. He was tired, but he wouldn't admit it. You know how he is. He said he'd reach in three hours, rode his bike late evening."

he paused. Then the story unravelled.

It was a long stretch of highway, the kind that invites speed. The sky had turned charcoal grey, wind tugging at his hoodie. Ishan's bike—his beloved black Pulsar—roared as it cut through the dusk like a dare.

The throttle was almost full when it happened. A sudden flicker of movement—a stray dog bolting across the road.

Instinct took over. Ishan jerked the handle, hard left. The tires screeched like they were tearing through gravel and time. The bike slid. Steel scraped asphalt. His helmet bounced once, then again.

And then, silence.

The hospital later reported the call came from a truck driver who saw the crash from behind. They took him to the nearest emergency centre. He was unconscious.

"I was at tuition," Amit's voice cracked on the phone, "and Mum and Dad were called to the hospital. I remember papa's hands shaking."

Ishan was in the ICU for eleven days. Surface wounds had begun healing. But he didn't wake up.

Doctors ran test after test—MRIs, CT scans, EEGs. No clear reason why he wasn't regaining consciousness.

Until someone suggested calling in a senior neurosurgeon.

"He came in the evening," Amit continued. "Didn't say much. Just ordered a spinal tap. I still remember—he told the nurse, 'Do it quickly, I don't want to lose the window.'"

A massive needle, thick and sharp like something from a horror film, was inserted between Ishan's vertebrae. They drew cerebrospinal fluid.

That's when the diagnosis came: subarachnoid haemorrhage with spinal inflammation and fluid imbalance. A condition which could recur, the doctor warned. "Sometimes," he had said, "injuries like these sleep inside you. For years. Until they wake up."

And when they do, they don't knock.

Sachin sat silent, the phone still pressed to his ear.

Amit spoke again, softer now.

"He was on medication for a year. Heavy doses. Mood swings, fatigue, nightmares. He pulled himself together eventually, like always. But he never fully healed. He never wanted to be reminded."

Sachin blinked slowly, fingers curling into a fist on his lap.

"He should've told someone."

"I think," he said, "he didn't want to be seen as fragile."

And now he understand his fear riding a bike too. Everything made sense to him.

Sachin ended the call, leaned back in the waiting chair, and looked at his friend.

Still, unconscious.

Still, fighting.

He stood up, walked out of the ward, and called Nikhil from the society who had loaned him the car. "I might need it for a few more days," he said. "My friend's not doing well. I've got a bike, in case you need it in the meantime, you can use it. I will handover the keys to you this evening."

And then he texted Zara.

"We'll talk later. Not the time now. He's fighting something old... something we never saw coming."

He placed his phone face down and returned to Ishan's bedside. Sachin wasn't going anywhere.

Because the people who once pulled you back from silence — you never leave them in theirs.

Back at home, silence had fallen like a thin sheet over everything.

Zara's phone buzzed—Sachin's message: "We'll talk later. Not the time now. He's fighting something old... something we never saw coming."

Her thumb hovered over the reply button. Then she put the phone aside.

The kind of silence that has weight, a texture. The kind that hangs between rooms like cobwebs when people stop speaking not because there's nothing to say, but because too much has been left unsaid.

Zara wandered through the house like a guest in her own memory. The living room was neat—too neat, the cushions aligned like soldiers, the glass table spotless. Her mother's dupatta was still hanging from the back of the dining chair, forgotten, unmoving. Her father had gone out early walk, or so he had said, and her mother hadn't asked more than that.

She found herself in the study room, the one baba rarely let anyone clean. Dust motes danced in the sunbeam that

slipped through the half-shut curtains. The bookshelf still carried the smell of old pages and stubborn memory.

As she bent to fix a fallen pile of papers, a folder slipped out from between some files—its spine worn, labelled in faded blue ink: “Hepatology & Internal”

Zara froze. Her father had always been healthy—at least that’s what he claimed. The last she remembered was him laughing about cholesterol being for the rich.

She opened the folder slowly, heart pressing harder against her ribs with each page.

Liver function tests from nine months ago.

Ultrasound abdomen reports.

FibroScan readings.

Pages and pages of blood work with highlighted values she barely understood — elevated bilirubin, SGOT, SGPT, albumin dropping lower with each follow-up.

Then came the hepatology consultation notes.

“Chronic liver disease progression observed.”

“Signs of fibrosis advancing.”

“Patient non-compliant with medication and dietary restrictions.”

Her throat tightened.

There were prescriptions folded carelessly between the papers, some unopened. Follow-up appointments missed. Handwritten instructions underlined twice by the doctor:

“No alcohol.”

“Regular monitoring essential.”

“Further deterioration possible if neglected.”

The last report was dated barely three weeks ago.

An Internal Medicine review.

“Persistent fatigue, intermittent abdominal swelling, worsening liver parameters.”

“Recommend urgent evaluation.”

“Possible early cirrhotic changes.”

“Patient counselled regarding treatment adherence.  
Decision pending.”

Her fingers stiffened around the page.

For a moment the room felt unbearably silent.

Not because she didn’t understand the medical terms  
completely—

but because she understood enough.

Enough to know this wasn’t temporary.

Enough to know he had hidden it.

Enough to realize he had been carrying all of this alone  
while laughing normally, working normally, living as if his  
body wasn’t quietly failing him from the inside.

Her hands trembled.

She took a deep breath. Stepped out into the backyard—  
their aangan. The familiar green greeted her, soothing and  
jarring at once. Mango trees swayed with quiet dignity. The  
guava tree still had its iron swing tied to one branch. There  
were tulsi pots, neem saplings, a stretch of marigolds—and the  
lemon plant Sachin had planted years ago during a summer  
visit.

It had overgrown now, bristling wildly in all directions.  
Zara kneeled beside it and picked a dried leaf.

Baba watered every plant himself, never letting the  
gardener touch them. He believed homes lived through the  
things that grew and needed care.

That’s what he did. Silently. Without ceremony.

Now she was beginning to understand why.

Back inside, voices drifted from the front room—her  
mother talking on the phone, her father returning from  
outside, pretending all was fine.

And suddenly, Zara felt anger bubbling beneath her ribs—not loud, not violent. The kind that swells when someone you love keeps you out, even if to protect you.

She walked straight to her room. Picked up her phone.

No new message from Sachin. She typed:

“You were right about the silence. This house is full of it. But it’s not the peaceful kind. It’s the kind that hides hepatology reports in folders and pretends abnormal liver enzymes are just ‘stress and bad eating habits.’”

She didn’t press send.

Instead, she just whispered it aloud, to no one:

“baba ... why wouldn’t you just tell us?”

-----:~)-----

The beeping of the monitors had softened into something almost rhythmic—steady, mechanical, indifferent. It no longer sounded alarming. It sounded like the room had its own pulse.

Ishan lay slightly propped up against a stiff hospital pillow, eyes fixed on the IV line taped to his hand as if it were a complicated equation he might eventually decode. The transparent drip. The slow, measured drops. The thinness of it all.

Sachin sat at the edge of the bed, arms folded across his chest. He hadn’t slept properly in two days. His shirt was creased, his stubble uneven, eyes red—but he carried that quiet alertness he always slipped into during crises. Not dramatic. Not loud. Just present.

Protective without announcing it.

Ishan wanted to speak. There were a hundred questions swirling inside him—about the accident, about how long he’d been out, about how Sachin had found him. About whether he had scared everyone.

But the medication made his tongue feel like it belonged to someone else. Heavy. Disobedient. When he tried to form words, they melted into slurred fragments.

Instead, he made a clumsy gesture with his fingers—half sign language, half dumb charades.

“Phone?” he managed.

Sachin immediately reached for it from the side table and handed it over, adjusting the pillow behind him without comment.

The screen lit up like a festival. Missed calls. WhatsApp notifications stacked endlessly. Emails. Office pings. Family group messages.

Ishan ignored them all.

He opened his chat with Sachin. With slow, deliberate typing, he wrote:

thanks bro.

Sachin’s phone buzzed almost instantly in his pocket. He pulled it out, glanced at the message, and smirked before typing back:

such a dumb ass you are.

Ishan squinted at his screen, fighting the haze, and typed with exaggerated effort:

you can say it aloud. you don’t have slurred speech. bloody dumb ass.

For a second, there was silence.

Then both of them laughed—soft at first, then helplessly. The kind of laughter that leaks out after fear has passed but hasn’t fully left the body.

It wasn’t about the joke. It was relief.

Across the corridor, Amit had been texting non-stop since the night of the incident. Sachin stepped out briefly to respond:

He's conscious. Under supervision. Stable for now. I'll keep you updated.

He copied the same message to Zara.

Three dots appeared almost instantly in both chats.

Back inside the room, Ishan leaned his head back against the pillow. The ceiling above him felt familiar in a strange way. The white tiles. The faint antiseptic smell. The hum of air conditioning.

Déjà vu.

He had been here before. Not this exact room—but this feeling. The crash returned in fragments.

The highway at night. The sudden screech of tires. A truck's headlights blooming too large, too fast. The sharp swerve. The violent skid. The world tilting sideways. Then—

Nothing. Then brightness. Monitors. Murmurs. Someone saying his name like it might anchor him back.

And when he had first opened his eyes, groggy and stitched back together by strangers, there had been one face in the room amongst his family member.

Raina.

## 8

Not a girlfriend. Not labeled anything dramatic. Just someone who had stayed. When nurses had stepped out. When the others had gone to complete paperwork. When the corridor had emptied.

She had sat quietly, not touching him, not panicking. Just there.

He remembered her saying, “You’re not allowed to die on a Saturday or any other day. It’s inconvenient.”

(Right after school, everyone scattered in different directions, chasing careers, colleges, and futures they had once only spoken about in classroom whispers. But Raina stayed back in Hyderabad for her graduation. She had secured admission into a degree program that aligned perfectly with the path she had already chosen for herself.

And somewhere between assignments, internships, and lonely hostel evenings, nostalgia hit her one night hard enough for her to search up old classmates on Facebook.

That was when she found Ishan.

To her surprise, he too had stayed back in Hyderabad for his B.Tech. It felt oddly comforting—knowing that someone from those school corridors was living in the same city, breathing the same air, surviving the same adult confusion.

They started talking often after that.

Nothing dramatic. Mostly random conversations stretched across late nights. Updates about classmates. Who had changed schools. Who was dating whom. Who had become unbearable. Who still acted exactly the same.

And at that point, Sachin was not even part of the equation.

Raina tried more than once to meet Ishan properly. A simple café plan. Nothing complicated. But the first attempt died in the most ridiculous way possible.

“I can’t come,” Ishan had texted.

“Why?”

“Because I washed all my clothes today.”

Raina had stared at the message for a full minute before typing back:

“What do you mean ALL your clothes?”

“I mean,” he replied shamelessly, “I currently only own confidence and undergarments. If you’re okay meeting me like that, I can still come.”

She laughed so hard she got irritated at the same time.

“What kind of survival strategy is this? Why do boys live like abandoned hostel creatures?”

“It’s efficient.”

“It’s concerning.”

Then came her practical interrogation.

“What if there was an emergency? What if you actually had to go outside?”

“Then I would’ve thought differently,” he answered casually. “But this is just a meeting. It can be postponed.”

That sentence annoyed her far more than it should have.

Still, they stayed in touch.

A few weeks later, Raina decided to make another plan. This time she texted him on Thursday itself because she liked giving people enough time to prepare.

Sunday. Café. Evening.

And at the end of the message, she added:

“Also, please don’t wash every piece of clothing you own this time. Spare at least one outfit for civilization.”

No reply. Thursday passed. Friday passed. Saturday passed.

The messages remained unseen.

At first she was only confused. Ishan was irresponsible, yes. Lazy sometimes, absolutely. Full of horrible excuses, definitely. But he always replied.

Always.

Something about the silence felt wrong.

So after trying to wait it out, she searched for Amit—his younger brother—on Facebook and messaged him directly.

The reply came after some time, and suddenly the entire week rearranged itself in her head.

Thursday and Friday, Ishan had apparently been busy with events and preparations for a coding competition at college.

And Saturday— Saturday he had met with an accident. That was why the messages were unseen.

Raina did not think twice after that.

She took the hospital address from Amit, dropped every other plan she had, and went straight there.

And honestly, her presence surprised Ishan as much as everyone else.

When she introduced herself to his parents as an old school friend, there was no awkwardness, no suspicion—just warmth. The kind Indian families naturally extend when someone shows up for their child in a difficult moment.

But the sweetest moment came outside the ward.

There were limited visitor passes allowed during that hour, and Amit had one in his hand.

He looked toward the room, then toward Raina, before pressing the pass into her palm instead.

“Didi,” he said with a grin, “make it count.”

Then, lowering his voice dramatically, he added,

“And please embarrass him as much as you want. This man has tortured all of us till he finally came back to consciousness.”)

He had tried to laugh then too.

A faint smile curved on his lips now at the memory.

“What’s so funny?” Sachin’s voice cut in gently. “The hospital walls telling jokes?”

Ishan turned his head toward him.

For a second, he considered saying her name.

But he swallowed it.

Some memories felt too fragile to expose. And some names—especially ones that lingered between almost and never—carried a weight he wasn’t ready to place in this room.

He just shook his head slightly. “Nothing,” he tried to say, though it came out blurred.

Sachin narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “You look like someone who’s about to make bad decisions again.”

Ishan’s smile deepened faintly.

The machines continued their steady beeping. This time, though, when he looked at the visitor’s chair beside his bed, it wasn’t empty. And for now, that was enough. They returned two days later.

Sachin held the door open while Ishan walked in slowly, lighter now, but not entirely whole. The hospital stay had etched something in both of them—not a scar, but maybe a small reminder of how fragile life could get, silently, overnight.

The flat was silent, oddly welcoming.

It smelled faintly of closed windows, dusted floors, and routines that had been on pause.

“I swear, the fridge was alive when we left,” Ishan muttered, opening it. “Now it’s a graveyard.”

Sachin tossed his keys onto the table and sighed. “We need a system.”

“A system?”

“A breakup plan.”

“Please tell me it’s not a breakup-breakup.”

“No, a food-breakup,” Sachin clarified. “Like, we break up with Maggi. And random Swiggy deliveries. And maybe, just maybe... walk to buy groceries.”

Ishan smirked. “So, a breakup plan with all our happiness.”

“Exactly.”

They stood facing each other in mock-seriousness for a second.

“Chai?” Sachin offered.

“And fries?” Ishan added hopefully.

Sachin stared at him. Then gave in. “To plan our diet over.”

They called it the Pre-Diet Celebration.

-----:);-----

Zara folded the crumpled prescription reports neatly and tucked them into the back of her diary. For now, she wouldn’t speak of it—not over the phone, not in texts. She would wait till she saw Sachin in person. Some things demanded eye contact. Stillness. Conversation, open ended discussion. And perhaps a moment of courage.

The trees outside the ancestral house rustled as though they agreed. Every branch in their garden whispered

something—frangipani, guava, neem, even that stubborn bougainvillea. The home was enormous, old, and quietly breathing in stories. Zara watched the wind lift a few leaves. She held the silence.

Sachin and Ishan sipped chai from their mismatched mugs, a plate of crispy fries balanced on a tray between them.

Their phones sat ignored... until now.

“Time to face the digital storm,” Ishan groaned, unlocking his.

Sachin did the same—and chaos poured in.

Missed logs from the office manager. Reminders from his interns. A passive-aggressive voice notes from Sameer that said, “Don’t forget me just because I didn’t almost die.” And finally, a message from Zara:

“Left home. Reaching Bangalore by 7. Will attend college tomorrow. Then coming to see Ishan. Also, need to talk to you. In person.”

Sachin stared at the message a second longer. Then locked his phone without replying.

Next to him, Ishan was going through his own flood of missed notifications.

Calls from his cousin brother and his own brother Amit too. A long chain of unanswered WhatsApps from his mother.

And then—Raina.

Just one line.

“Is everything alright? I just felt like checking on you.”

Ishan’s thumb froze mid-scroll.

He hadn’t been expecting that.

For the past few days—lying in that hospital bed, drifting in and out of medicated sleep—his mind had been looping through old memories like a playlist stuck on repeat. The

accident. The ceiling lights. The slow return to consciousness. And her.

Raina.

The way she had sat there without making a spectacle of it. The way she hadn't asked dramatic questions. The way she had simply stayed. He hadn't spoken to her properly in over a year. No calls. No texts. Just the occasional birthday message that people send out of habit more than intention.

They had faded quietly. No fight. No closure. Just distance.

And now—out of nowhere—her name flashed on his screen.

“Is everything alright? I just felt like checking on you.”

He stared at the message, rereading it as if it might rearrange itself into something less unsettling.

Over a year of silence.

And now this.

He felt his chest tighten—not in panic, but in disbelief.

Did she sense something?

Was it coincidence? Someone common must have told her. Maybe Amit. Maybe social media carried the news faster than he realized. Or maybe it was simpler than all that.

But his mind, already softened by nostalgia and painkillers, drifted somewhere more irrational.

Is this telepathy? Or just timing?

He had been thinking about her for days. Remembering the hospital room from before. The way her presence had steadied the chaos. The unfinished sentences between them.

And now she was here again—digitally, at least—asking about his well-being.

His thumb hovered over the keyboard.

So many possible replies. Casual. Grateful. Distant. Honest.

Instead, he locked the screen for a moment and exhaled slowly.

Some messages don't just ask how you are. They ask who you've been since.

Something about it made him sit straighter.

That's the thing about real bonds, he thought. No performance. No loud declarations. Just presence.

Even if untended. Even if quiet. Somewhere in the universe, she still prayed for him.

He tapped open the keyboard and typed:

"Yes, all good. You say? How are you, my ghost? Planning to ghost me for another 2 years now?"

He hit send, and smiled.

"Who's making you smile like that?" Sachin asked, eyebrows raised.

"Just... a ghost."

Sachin smiled back and didn't said anything.

"Ghost" wasn't just a random name.

It had been Raina's idea—during that impulsive monsoon trek to Lonavala, the one they'd planned at 11 p.m. and executed at 5 a.m. with barely any sleep and too much enthusiasm.

(It was after her graduation in Hyderabad that Raina received a campus placement offer in Bangalore. Like most fresh graduates stepping into corporate life, she packed her ambitions, anxieties, and two oversized suitcases and moved cities without really knowing what adulthood would look like.

Coincidentally, around the same time, Ishan too landed in Bangalore while searching for better career opportunities. The city was new, expensive, overcrowded, and deeply

uninterested in making life easy for newcomers. So, while hunting for a place to stay, Ishan ended up scrolling through Facebook one evening and realized that Sachin was already in Bangalore, working at Infosys.

He immediately texted him.

Mostly casual questions at first.

Where are you staying? How far is your office? Do you know any decent apartments nearby?

And most importantly—

“Do you know any place where I can crash till I figure things out?”

Sachin, being painfully and effortlessly Sachin himself, replied almost instantly:

“Why are you even searching elsewhere? Just come here. There’s enough space. We’ll adjust.”

And somehow, that was how it began.

What started as temporary adjustment slowly became routine life. Late-night Maggi. Office complaints.

Shared cab rides. Laundry piled on chairs. Weekend cricket matches on mute while one of them worked on presentations. The apartment became less of a flat and more of a survival unit.

And when Raina found out through conversations that Sachin too was now in Bangalore, she slowly became part of that rhythm as well.

At first, meetings happened casually, the first waiting at metro station to meet Sachin enroute to a café to meet Ishan there.

Coffee after work. Street-side dosa runs at midnight. Random plans that started with “Let’s just meet for one hour” and somehow stretched till 2 a.m.

Sometimes she would crash at their apartment after long evenings because going back alone that late felt pointless.

Sometimes all three would meet somewhere outside just to escape the exhaustion of corporate life for a few hours.

And that was when the trio truly formed.

But initially, things between Raina and Sachin remained extremely formal.

Polite. Measured. Almost distant.

Ishan was the connecting bridge between them in every conversation. If he left the room, silence usually followed for a few seconds before one of them awkwardly restarted the discussion.

Because the truth was—during school, Sachin had barely existed in Raina's world.

Not negatively. Just invisibly. He had simply been another boy in another row of another classroom.

But adulthood has a strange way of reintroducing people. Slowly, through shared nostalgia and repeated conversations, she began discovering pieces of him she had never noticed before.

The way he remembered absurdly tiny details about school. How sincerely he spoke about old teachers.

How carefully he listened when someone else talked. How his humour arrived quietly instead of demanding attention. And somewhere between conversations about timetable schedules, old classmates, punishments, annual functions, and forgotten memories, something subtle began shifting between them.

Not loudly. Not dramatically. Just quietly enough to be dangerous. Neither of them acknowledged it. Neither crossed any line. But Ishan noticed. Of course he noticed. He noticed the way Sachin's tone softened around her. The way Raina unconsciously searched for Sachin first while speaking. The way both of them laughed more freely when the other was around. And because he loved them both too much to disturb

whatever was unfolding naturally, he stayed quiet about it for a very long time).

Back then, the four of them—Sachin, Ishan, Raina, and Amit—had taken an early local train out of the city. The windows had been fogged with humidity, backpacks stuffed under seats, the air smelling of wet earth even before they'd reached the hills. Lonavala in monsoon didn't look real—it looked painted. Mist hanging low, hills wrapped in green so intense it almost hurt to look at.

Sachin, as always, was the first to notice stray dogs near the base of the trail. He crouched down instinctively, hand extended, already smiling. He had that soft corner for dogs that showed up everywhere—streets, cafes, hill stations.

Raina, on the other hand, kept a polite distance. Not scared exactly, but guarded. She never leaned in to pet them, never encouraged them either. Ishan stayed predictably neutral—observing, occasionally commenting, never fully invested.

They had barely begun the ascent when a scruffy, lean dog appeared out of nowhere and started following them. At first, they thought it was coincidence. Then it began weaving between them, running ahead and looking back as if making sure they were still there.

“Great,” Ishan muttered. “We’ve been assigned security.”

The dog didn't bark. Didn't demand food. Just followed. Patient. Silent.

Halfway up, when the fog thickened and the trail narrowed, it moved ahead confidently—almost like it knew the path better than Google Maps. Whenever they slowed down, it paused too. When they stopped for water, it sat at a small distance, watching.

“Why does it feel like it's guiding us?” Raina said softly.

Ishan laughed lightly. “Because you watch way too many feel-good movies.”

Raina rolled her eyes at him, muttering something under her breath, while Amit burst out laughing beside them.

Ahead of them, Sachin had already picked up pace without even realizing it. Long strides, hands casually tucked into his pockets, completely focused on finding the route on his phone as he kept walking farther and farther ahead.

For him, walking fast was natural.

For the other three, it was punishment.

“Does he think we’re in the army?” Amit complained dramatically, slightly out of breath.

“He walks like he has quarterly targets to meet before sunset,” Ishan added.

But even while joking around, Ishan noticed it.

Raina had gone quieter. Not upset. Just... watching.

Every few seconds her eyes drifted ahead toward Sachin instinctively, as if measuring the distance between them without meaning to. There was an odd restlessness in the way she walked now—as though she wanted him closer but would never actually ask him to slow down.

And because Ishan understood people far better than he pretended to, he immediately started filling the silence.

One joke after another. Random stories.

Fake commentary about Sachin’s “Olympic-level speed walking.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced dramatically, “ahead of us we see a rare species—the Corporate Male. Notice how he abandons his group during treks, mall visits, and emotional conversations.”

Amit laughed loudly. Even Raina smiled. But her eyes still kept wandering ahead. Still searching for Sachin. And Ishan noticed that too.

There was something painfully soft about it—the way she never called out his name, never demanded attention, never complained... yet her entire expression quietly betrayed how much his presence mattered to her.

As though simply walking beside him would have been enough.

At the top, the mist parted just enough.

The valley opened beneath them—layers of green folding into each other, waterfalls cutting white lines down rocky faces, clouds drifting low enough to feel within reach. The wind was cold, sharp, clean. For a moment, none of them spoke.

The dog sat beside them, facing the view like it belonged there.

Raina crouched down slowly this time. “It’s like it appeared out of nowhere,” she murmured. “And just... stayed.”

She looked at it thoughtfully.

“Ghost,” she declared.

“Why Ghost?” Ishan asked.

“Because it came from the mist and didn’t make a sound. And because it feels like it’s not entirely ours—but it chose to walk with us anyway.”

Sachin looked at her a little longer than necessary after that.

Raina was impressed by the beauty- with the place, the journey, the feeling of reaching somewhere earned.

Ishan stood there, hands in pockets, unimpressed.

“Kya har jagah pathar aur thand hi hoti hai?” he scoffed. “Is this the big magical view? It’s just rocks and cold air.”

They threw pebbles at him for that.

But even he smiled eventually.

By the time they started descending, Ghost had vanished as mysteriously as it had arrived. No goodbye. No trail. Just gone.



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Back in the present, the memory lingered between them like unfinished dialogue.

Sachin had been staring into nothing for a few seconds, Sachin's deep thinking was interrupted by Ishan's voice.

"Bro... if you stare at the wall any harder, it's going to confess its secrets."

Sachin blinked, pulled back from wherever his mind had wandered. The living room lights were warm and slightly dim. An open packet of fries sat between them, already losing heat. The faint smell of chai lingered in the air—overboiled, too sweet, familiar.

For a second, Sachin just looked at Ishan—really looked at him. The faint bruise near his temple. The healing cut above his eyebrow. The tiredness that hadn't fully left his eyes.

Then he reached forward, picked up a fry, dipped it carefully into ketchup like it was a ceremonial act, and raised it in the air.

"To us," he declared with mock grandeur. "The new couple. May our dishes always remain unwashed and our reels always interrupted."

Ishan didn't miss a beat. He clinked his fry against Sachin's.

"Cheers, roomie. Don't die on me yet. You still haven't paid the WiFi bill."

Sachin scoffed. "I almost did, idiot."

"Yeah, well. Next time schedule your existential crises after the billing cycle."

They laughed—tired, slightly hoarse, but real.

The kind of laughter that comes after hospital corridors, after sleepless nights, after fear you don't fully talk about.

Outside, a bike passed down the street. Somewhere in the building, a pressure cooker whistled. A neighbour argued softly on the phone. Ordinary sounds stitched themselves back into the evening.

Sachin leaned back into the couch, exhaling.

Ishan stretched his legs out, wincing slightly but pretending he didn't.

No dramatic declarations. No emotional speeches. Just fries, sarcasm, and the quiet comfort of being alive in the same room.

The next evening, the bell rang twice — sharp, familiar.

Ishan was on the couch with a hot pack on his shoulder, lazily scrolling through a reel where a guy was making perfect rotis at lightning speed.

Sachin opened the door.

There she stood — Zara. In black jeans, her hair tied in a loose bun, wearing the same oversized kurta that somehow survived every laundry day. She had a paper bag in one hand, and a quiet look in her eyes that didn't match her usual sarcasm.

"You're late," Sachin said.

"You're still annoying," she replied, walking in.

Ishan perked up. "Look who finally decided to show up after abandoning the patient."

Zara dropped the bag on the table. "Relax, I got you both samosas. You can fight over the bigger one."

Sachin told Zara as how they have started their new routine food plan – apparently the good food plan which does not have any space for her samosa.

"Consider it already mine," Ishan muttered, grabbing the bag.

She didn't joke back.

Sachin noticed. The flicker. That gentle off-sync. The weight she was trying to wear like a scarf — loosely, casually, but it was heavy nonetheless.

They sat in silence for a while. The fan whirred above, and somewhere outside, someone was playing an old Kishore Kumar song.

“Classes?” Ishan asked with a mouth full of samosa.

“Boring.”

“Home?”

Zara hesitated. Her thumb started tracing the rim of the cup in front of her.

“Complicated,” she said quietly. “I'll tell you both. But later. Just... not now. Okay?”

Sachin exchanged a glance with Ishan. No push. No questions.

“Okay,” he nodded.

Zara exhaled.

The flat, though simple, had slowly become the only place that held space for their silence. The unspoken didn't feel lost here — it just waited, respectfully.

The three sat on the balcony.

Ishan was telling some exaggerated version of his hospital stay, ending with “...and then the nurse looked at me like I was Hrithik Roshan. Fever apparently improves my jawline.”

A small plane blinked its way across the sky above. Down below, the city thrummed in its mundane madness. Zara watched the sky quietly, and Sachin kept glancing at her. He knew the talk was coming.

Later, Ishan excused himself and went to sleep, his ongoing medications leaving him unusually lethargic and drowsy.

The city had slowed. Even the traffic noise had softened into distant sighs. Inside the flat, Ishan had finally dozed off on the couch, snoring lightly with a hot water bag pressed against his side and his mobile playing some wildlife documentary no one had watched past five minutes.

Sachin stepped out onto the balcony with two mugs one of ginger tea and the other with bournvita milk— the ginger tea, kind Zara liked — slightly extra milk, extra sugar.

Zara was already out there, curled up in the old balcony chair with her legs pulled in, wearing that thoughtful look she wore whenever the world inside her felt heavier than the one outside.

He handed her the mug. “Peace offering.”

She took it, sipped, and smiled faintly. “You remembered.”

Sachin leaned against the railing, facing the street below. “I always do.”

There was a pause — the kind that carries weight, not awkwardness.

Zara looked at him, her voice quiet but not uncertain.

“papa’s not well.”

Sachin didn’t react. Not in shock. Not in worry. Just...stillness.

She continued. “I found some old reports... accidentally. Liver’s in bad shape. He’s hiding a lot. Maa’s pretending everything’s normal. And chachu wants the village home to be sold, thinks it’s useless now.”

Sachin finally looked at her. “That home’s not just a house, Zara. It’s where mom plants basil every winter and dad teaches random kids about composting. That neem tree in the corner still has your carved initials.”

“I know,” she whispered, eyes glassy. “But to them, it’s just too much now. Too many arguments. And a liability.”

Sachin took a deep breath, the kind you take when you want to say more but don't have the map for the words.

"You didn't tell them?"

Zara shook her head. "Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first."

"And?"

"I don't know what to do," she confessed. "I feel like I'm splitting into two people. One who wants to fix everything, and the other who just wants to pack a bag and vanish into a different life."

Sachin laughed gently, not mockingly. "Welcome to adulthood."

Zara's laugh was soft, broken. "Does it always suck this much?"

"No," he said. "Sometimes, it sucks more."

She looked at him, grateful for the honesty. Then, quieter, almost like a confession:

"I think I'm scared, Not of losing the house. But of what happens after."

Sachin looked down at the tea, then at her.

"You know," he said slowly, "for someone who rearranges my kitchen every time she visits, you're surprisingly scared of change."

Zara smiled through her sigh. "I rearrange to feel in control."

"And now?"

"Now I'm just... tired."

Sachin nodded. "Then don't fix it all tonight. Just sleep. We'll figure it out tomorrow."

She stared at him for a second. "Promise?"

"Cross my sarcastic heart," he said..

The flat was asleep — at least that’s what it looked like from the outside.

Ishan was finally in a stable rhythm of breath in the other room, his fever dulled by medication, exhaustion, and probably the quiet sense of being seen.

Zara, too, had retreated to the spare bed, leaving behind an empty tea mug and a hundred unsaid things that hung like soft echoes in the walls.

But Sachin couldn’t sleep.

He had tried. Laid down. Shut his eyes. Even counted backwards from a hundred. But sleep refused to come — as if his body knew what his mind was fighting to avoid.

He sat on the floor beside the bean bag, back against the cold wall, legs stretched out on the carpet, head heavy. The soft light from the hallway spilled in just enough to cast long shadows on the floor.

He had promised Zara he’d be her sounding board — her calm. And he had meant it. Every single word. But now, in the cold quiet of his own mind, Sachin was unraveling.

Papa’s reports weren’t vague. The hepatology notes showed this hadn’t started recently — the liver damage had been progressing quietly for years. What struck Sachin most was the pattern hidden between the numbers: the unstable sugar levels, the persistent fatigue, the sudden weight loss they had all dismissed as stress, age, or irregular eating. But now, looking at the scans and fibrosis markers together, it no longer felt like “just weakness.” It felt like they had all missed the signs while Papa kept pretending everything was normal.

He was pretending not to be.

And Sachin knew, *his father never pretended* — unless it meant protecting his pride.

But how would Sachin confront him now?

Their relationship had always been lukewarm — polite, respectful, functional.

But warm? Never.

Even as a boy, Sachin had felt more like a guest than a son in his father's world — always trying not to be *too emotional, too lost, too loud, too soft*.

His father, with his upright postures and opinions carved in stone, never knew how to hold the kind of son Sachin turned out to be — quiet, opinionated, sensitive, full of questions and silences and deep seethed kindness.

And yet here he was, about to have a conversation that required intimacy, concern, confrontation.

And love. The kind neither of them ever learned to speak out loud.

And then... the house. That house wasn't just bricks and furniture.

It was the mango tree where Sachin had first hidden adventurous letter to Zara in Class 7 for some kind of treasure present deep under the ground. The wide verandah where maa dried red chilies every summer vacations. The tiny back shed where he'd once accidentally locked Rustle (his pet dog) as a prank.

How do you stop a ship from sinking, when everyone else onboard has already stopped swimming?

And just when his thoughts couldn't grow heavier, Raina crept in.

Like a whisper from the inside. Like some unsent letter his soul still carried around.

He didn't say her name. He never did, not even in his thoughts. Because to say it felt like cutting open something sacred.

But tonight, the mind was cruel. It remembered her voice when she called his father "Uncle Ji" so gently.

It remembered how she'd asked about his family long before he himself could talk about them.

How she made tea and whispered, "Some families live in one another. Some only survive each other."

And tonight, Sachin was just surviving.

He wept.

Not intensely. Not loudly. Just quiet, shattered breathing. The kind you don't want the world to hear — but hope someone, somewhere would still feel.

His head rested against the wall, cool plaster pressing lightly against his head. The room was dark except for the faint blue glow spilling from his phone, illuminating his face in quiet pulses.

He held the device loosely in both hands, thumb hovering over her name.

Raina.

Her profile sat there—one tap away. A doorway to photos, updates, a version of her life he had chosen not to look at for over a year or may be more. His mind urged him forward. Just check. Just once. It doesn't mean anything.

But another part of him resisted—the part that knew some doors, once opened, don't close as easily.

His thoughts felt heavy, tangled. Curiosity wrestled with caution. Nostalgia with pride.

He swallowed, locked the screen, and set the phone aside on the bed.

The blue light disappeared, leaving the room darker than before.

He exhaled slowly, staring at the ceiling now—knowing that sometimes, not looking takes more courage than looking ever would.

Because everything felt like it was tearing.

Zara was trying to hold her family's roof with bleeding hands.

Ishan was holding onto life with old injuries and borrowed strength.

Papa was hiding his sickness in silence.

The house was being talked about like a number on paper.

And Raina — well, she was a memory that still walked barefoot in his chest.

Sachin felt like he was trying to wrap the world with his bare arms, but everything kept slipping out, like trying to hold water in a broken bowl.

By the time dawn arrived, the sky hadn't even begun to turn. But inside that dim living room, something had already broken. And perhaps... that was the beginning of him learning how to rebuild.

Morning arrived without drama—soft light slipping through the curtains, the faint noise of traffic beginning its daily rehearsal below.

Zara left first, half-awake but efficient, stuffing her notes into her tote bag while reminding them to eat something that wasn't fried.

Sachin and Ishan chose to work from home.

The dining table turned into a makeshift office again—two laptops open, chargers stretched across the floor like territorial lines. Coffee mugs replaced last night's chai glasses. Slack notifications chimed. Emails stacked up.

Sachin joined back-to-back calls, camera on, posture straight, voice steady and professional—no hint of the chaos of the past week. Between meetings, he muted himself to ask Ishan if he'd taken his meds.

Ishan, still recovering, worked slower. He replied to emails, reviewed documents, paused occasionally when his

head felt heavy. Every now and then, he leaned back, staring at the ceiling fan as if it might spin clarity into him.

By afternoon, the house settled into a quiet rhythm—the hum of laptops, the clatter of keyboards, the occasional sarcastic comment thrown across the table.

At lunch, they ordered something simple. They argued about whose turn it was to do the dishes. Neither did them.

Evenings brought small routines back—watering the balcony plants, stepping out for a short walk, complaining about Wi-Fi speed, sharing reels they pretended not to care about.

Nothing extraordinary happened. And maybe that was the point. The days moved forward—not dramatically, not loudly—but steadily, stitching normalcy back into their lives one ordinary routine at a time.

## 9

The living room lights flickered to life with a weary click. Sachin stepped in, shoulders low, bag slipping from one arm like it didn't belong anymore. His tie was still on, halfway undone, but his soul had already signed out of the day.

Ishan was already home, propped up against the couch with a shawl wrapped around him like an entitled royal, one leg up on the centre table, phone in one hand, diet coke in the other, and a tray of biscuits untouched before him.

"Ah, finally," Ishan grinned, not even turning his face fully. "The dictator of productivity returns."

Sachin dropped his bag with a grunt and sank onto the opposite couch. "I'm two emails away from applying for vanvas."

Ishan squinted. "Are you okay or is that Shinchan's shadow painted under your eyes?"

Sachin glared at him. "Shut up and pass this diet coke to me."

Ishan laughed. "you mean, my diet coke? I'm the patient, remember? Recovering body, overworked emotions, bruised dignity."

"And now bruised jaw, if you don't get up," Sachin replied, stretching his neck with a sigh.

But the truth was... he *needed* something.

Not just for the taste — but for the pause it offered. The moment to breathe between chaos.

Ishan, dramatically dragging his blanket like a cloak, made his way to the kitchen, and within minutes, came with another diet coke from the fridge, “Here, liquid therapy. No side effects.”

They sipped in silence for a while, the bubbling bitterness settling into their throats. Ishan’s mobile played something forgettable in the background.

Then, without ceremony, Sachin broke the silence.

“Zara and I know about papa’s reports,” he said, eyes still on the can. “none of us have told anyone.

Ishan looked up, now serious, his eyebrows forming soft lines of concern.

“Damn...uncle?” re –confirming things and the person as well

Sachin nodded slowly. “He has no clue we found them. Or maybe he does. But... you know how our dads are. Pride stitched into their veins.”

Ishan gave a quiet hum.

“I want to talk to him,” Sachin added. “About the reports. About going for follow-ups. About how we need him to stop pretending he’s fine.”

“Right,” Ishan nodded. “So what’s stopping you?”

Sachin gave a half-laugh, half-sigh. “I don’t know how to say it without sounding like I’m accusing him of weakness. That man has raised us on discipline and silence. He’ll take offense just because I dared to care.”

He sipped again. His hands weren’t steady.

“And above that,” Sachin added, “how do you break it to someone that their body might betray them? That their son has been reading their reports like an outsider looking for clues?”

Ishan looked at him gently, and then — as usual — brought in the levity first.

“You could start by faking a dream,” he said. “Something like, ‘papa, I dreamt your liver was screaming at me. Let’s go get it checked, just in case.’”

Sachin chuckled, despite himself.

Then Ishan continued, this time softer. “Or... tell him that it’s not about doubt. It’s about love. Tell him the same way you told me when you rushed me to the hospital when I was struggling. You didn’t wait for anything. You just did what you had to.”

Sachin nodded slowly. The words landed.

Then Ishan, after a pause, looked up with a grin.

“Also, should I fake a condition too? We could start a ‘Fathers for Follow-ups’ campaign. I’ll act fragile again. Make it a bonding activity.”

Sachin laughed out loud now, resting his head back on the couch.

“Thank God you’re my flatmate,” he said.

“I know,” Ishan said smugly, raising his can. “And this patient is still charging you emotional rent.”

Sachin raised his can too. “Cheers to dark circles, and difficult conversations.”

“Cheers to not solving things alone in this mess,” Ishan added, and in the background, the rain started tapping softly against the glass again — like punctuation to a pause that wasn’t so heavy anymore.

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Sachin stood near the shoe rack, fingers grazing the dusty laces of a pair of sneakers that had seen too many monsoons and too little soap. The rubber was smudged, the white long faded into a shade of city-grey, but he still reached for them. Wore them.

Inside, Ishan was curled on the couch with a bowl of instant noodles, spooning them in like a content cat on a lazy evening. When Sachin walked out of his room, half-heartedly dressed in a basic shirt and jeans — the shirt crumpled at the ends and sleeves rolled in half-effort — Ishan whistled.

“Going for the ‘I-don’t-give-a-damn-but-still-showed-up’ look?” he smirked, setting the bowl down. “Or is this some kind of social experiment to see if anyone talks to you dressed like a walking apology?”

Sachin shook his head and grabbed his phone from the table.

“It’s my manager’s birthday. I’ll be back late.

But Ishan wasn’t done. He stood and squinted at Sachin’s sneakers.

“Wait. These? Dude, you literally bought a limited edition last month. Why not wear those?”

Sachin offered no explanation.

“And this hair?” Ishan gestured, mockingly scandalised. “What even is this? A beehive? At least comb it once, man. You look like a honeycomb with trust issues.”

Sachin finally let a small smile break the corners of his lips. No words. Just that familiar, quiet smile — the kind that doesn’t argue back.

He turned towards the door.

But as he walked out, a thought spilled inside his head. Not loud. Not poetic. Just the kind that stays long after you’ve moved on from the mirror.

*These shoes... because she hated them.*

*This hairstyle... because she loved it.*

*Even I don’t know what I’m trying to prove to myself.*

*Why this contradictory tug-of-war?*

*But isn't that what the heart and mind do when people you love leave?*

*The mind? Logical. It builds reasons, tall walls, escape doors. It says—run.*

*But the heart?*

*The heart is a mother. It waits at the door with a lantern. It prays. It forgives. It remembers everything and still loves.*

*So maybe I wear the things she hated to remind myself I've outgrown her.*

*And maybe I wear what she loved... to remind myself that a part of me never will.*

Sachin reached the lift, hands in pockets, head bowed — not from defeat, but from the weight of memory. The party was in a newly inaugurated cafe. But the past? The old clingy past, walked with him, barefoot.

Wrapped in his comforter cocoon, Ishan lay on the couch, the blue light of his phone casting a dull glow on the ceiling. The laptop was still on — some old sitcom rerun playing laugh tracks into an empty room — but his focus had shifted entirely to the chat screen open before him.

Raina.

That name had been a lingering ache for both of them.

For Sachin — it was love unspoken, memories unlabelled, everything sacred.

But for Ishan — it was also loss. A friendship that evaporated without warning, like a note left unfinished in the middle of a familiar song.

Over the past two years, he had sent her messages randomly.

“Hey, how are you?”

“Miss your dumb playlists.”

“Alive, traitor?”

Each met with either a one-word reply or just a blue tick that went nowhere.

Sachin never spoke much about Raina, never tried to justify her absence, never speculated. He had built a quiet shrine of grief and stayed there. But Ishan had questions. Not as a lover — but as someone who was part of the same story and still couldn't find the last page.

Tonight, after seeing the weight in Sachin's silence — heavier than usual — and recalling the war behind his reluctant smile before heading out, Ishan decided to do what perhaps he shouldn't.

He typed the message slowly. No jokes this time. Just what he truly felt.

Heyy, kaisi ho?

*Sorry to be your guide, but I think you should talk to Sachin. He's still holding on to you.*

*Sorry if I'm crossing my advisory level.*

*And yes, I miss us.*

He stared at it for a full minute.

And then... hit send.

A strange calm settled in his chest after that. He had said what needed to be said. Not for closure. Not for drama. Just for honesty — the kind Sachin would never ask for, and Raina might never respond to.

But it mattered.

Because the truth was — it wasn't just Sachin searching for answers.

Raina just abandoned *both* of them. No explanation. No fallout. Just a sudden stillness where noise once existed.

Sachin carried Raina's memory the way one carries a prayer — quietly, reverently, never spoken aloud, yet always present.

Ishan's memories of her were different. They were louder. Messier. Full of laughter that echoed in old corners of his mind. The stupid inside jokes. The endless teasing. The movie nights they planned but never actually managed to have. Back then, the three of them had believed that whatever this bond was, it would always remain simple.

Now, when he thought about it, it felt almost unreal — like remembering a friendship that had once been effortless but had somehow grown complicated with time.

Whenever Raina managed to escape work and come over for a weekend, their flat transformed into a small celebration. Sachin and Ishan would start preparing days in advance. What to cook, what to order, what snacks she liked, which dessert she preferred — everything was discussed over endless scrolling on their phones, comparing menus and recipes like it was a mission briefing.

And once she arrived, they treated her like royalty.

Food was cooked with unusual enthusiasm, the house was cleaned more thoroughly than it had ever been for themselves, and every small preference of hers was remembered.

Raina wasn't just their friend.

She was their person.

The strange thing was, even their friendship with each other somehow ran through her.

If Sachin ever wanted Ishan to do something — fix something in the house, help with some paperwork, or simply stop being lazy — he wouldn't argue with him. Instead, he would casually text Raina.

"Tell your favourite idiot to do this work."

Within minutes, Ishan's phone would buzz.

And somehow, he would do it.

On the other hand, if Sachin was ever seen talking to any random girl — even if he was just helping someone with

directions — Ishan would immediately message Raina like a loyal informant.

“Tra ladka haath se nikal raha hai.”

Within seconds Raina would call Sachin, half amused and half interrogative.

Their lives worked like that.

Every party invitation they received was also run through Raina. She would decide what they should wear, what gift they should take, and what time they should reach. The gift part, however, was always a battlefield. Sachin and Ishan firmly believed that gifts were unnecessary.

“Our presence itself is a gift,” they would argue with full confidence.

Raina would listen patiently, nod thoughtfully, almost as if she was convinced. And somehow, ten minutes later, both of them would still end up buying a gift. Neither of them ever quite understood how she managed that. One particular weekend still lived very vividly in Ishan’s memory.

Raina had come over for two days, and Zara had also joined them. Someone casually suggested visiting Mysore Palace, and within minutes the idea turned into a full-fledged plan. The four of them were so excited that none of them even slept that night. The tasks were divided almost officially. The boys were responsible for arranging transport. The girls were responsible for “getting ready properly”. By early morning, Zara and Raina had already taken showers and were getting dressed. When they finally stepped out of the room, both of them looked like they had walked straight out of a royal photoshoot. Flowing Indian outfits, heavy Jhumki, bangles chiming softly on their wrists, and dupattas trailing behind them like they belonged in the palace corridors they were about to visit.

Sachin and Ishan stared for a moment.

Then Sachin clapped once and said with complete authority, “Perfect. Wait here. We’ll bring the car.”

Because that was Sachin.

Whenever it came to people he loved, he preferred doing things properly. No buses. No compromises. If they were going to Mysore Palace, they were going in a car. The boys stepped out confidently to rent one. Forty-five minutes later, they returned to the flat. Empty-handed. Ishan entered first and cleared his throat dramatically.

“So,” he announced, trying not to laugh, “small update.”

Raina and Zara looked up immediately.

“Due to certain... highly technical... paper guarantee problems,” Ishan said slowly, “we could not get the rental car.”

Sachin leaned against the wall, already smiling.

“And,” Ishan continued, “all the buses to Mysore have already left.”

There was a moment of silence. Then all four of them burst out laughing. Just like that, the grand palace trip ended before it even began. But the morning didn’t feel wasted. In the middle of Ishan’s exaggerated storytelling about the chaos at the rental office — the confused manager, the paperwork, the ridiculous deposit demands — Sachin wasn’t even listening anymore.

He was simply looking at Raina. Still dressed like she was ready to walk through a palace. Still laughing freely. Still glowing in that quiet way that made everything around her feel lighter. Ishan suddenly stopped mid-sentence and pointed at him.

“Bas kar bhai,” he said, shaking his head with mock irritation.

“Ab hum awkward ho rahe hain.”

For a second there was silence. Then the four of them laughed again — louder this time. And somehow, that failed trip became one of their favourite stories to remember. Not because they couldn't reach Mysore Palace. But because sometimes the best memories were made on the mornings when plans failed completely.

Ishan remembered everything.

The laughter that filled the tiny flat on weekends, the chaotic planning sessions that never really led anywhere, the late-night conversations that stretched longer than they were meant to. The memories came back to him in fragments — small, ordinary moments that had once felt so effortless. And somewhere within all of that, there was Raina. What he had felt for her was never something he could neatly define.

It wasn't dramatic enough to be called love, at least not the kind people spoke about openly. Yet it wasn't simple friendship either. It lived somewhere in the quiet space between the two — something he never allowed himself to examine too closely. Because there had always been one simple fact that settled everything.

Sachin loved her.

And that alone was enough for Ishan to quietly step back from anything that could complicate things. There was no conscious sacrifice, no grand moment of decision. It had simply always been understood.

Still, there was a strange honesty in the way he was around Raina.

With most people, Ishan carried a certain roughness — sarcasm, teasing, a casual indifference that kept everyone slightly at a distance. But with her, things were different. Conversations with Raina were uncomplicated. There was no need to perform, no need to exaggerate or defend himself. He could simply be. The two of them shared a strange ease — a kind of calm friendship that didn't require effort. They could

sit in the same room doing completely different things and still feel like they were talking. Yet Raina, in her own quiet way, had always been trying to fix one particular thing in his life.

Zara.

It had started as a casual observation one day, but slowly it had become a running joke between the two of them.

Whenever Zara entered the room, Raina would subtly nudge Ishan with her elbow.

“Look,” she would whisper conspiratorially, “perfect match.” Ishan would immediately roll his eyes.

“Stop it,” he would mutter. But that never stopped her.

Sometimes she would deliberately leave the two of them alone in the kitchen while she “went to take a call.” Sometimes she would casually suggest that Zara and Ishan should sit together because they had “similar vibes.” And occasionally she would simply watch the two of them with the kind of amused curiosity people reserve for characters in a romantic film.

The entire operation had the seriousness of a secret mission. And strangely enough, it was a secret shared only between Raina and Ishan. Even Sachin had no idea. Not because it was intentionally hidden. Perhaps because Sachin would immediately start teasing them, or perhaps because the joke felt more fun when it remained theirs alone. Raina treated it like a personal project.

She believed — with a stubborn optimism — that if she just created the right moment, the right conversation, the right accidental situation, something might spark between them. An ignition, as she liked to call it. But Ishan never played along. Every time the conversation started drifting in that direction, he would stand up, stretch casually, and dismiss it with the same line. Ishan would listen with exaggerated seriousness, sometimes even nodding as if he were considering it. Then, at

the exact moment she expected him to agree, he would straighten up, raise a finger like a teacher about to explain a theorem, and say,

“Raina... do not forget the rule we studied together in class 9.”

She would frown immediately.

“What rule?”

Ishan would grin, already enjoying the drama he was about to create.

“The most important mathematical principle,” he would say with mock seriousness. “If  $\mathbf{A} = \mathbf{B}$  and  $\mathbf{B} = \mathbf{C}$ , then obviously  $\mathbf{A} = \mathbf{C}$ .”

Raina would stare at him, confused for a second.

“And your point is...?”

Ishan would then continue, counting on his fingers as if proving a very obvious equation.

“Sachin is my brother.”

He would pause for effect.

“Zara is Sachin’s sister.”

Another pause.

“So according to the sacred rule of class 9 mathematics...”

He would spread his hands dramatically.

“A brother’s sister is your own sister.”

Then he would lean back and conclude with complete satisfaction,

“Therefore, Zara is my sister. Case closed.”

For a moment Raina would just blink at him.

“You are impossible,” she would complain.

Ishan would only laugh, dodging the cushion and walking away while she continued muttering about how he had “destroyed perfectly good logic with mathematics.”

But the next time Zara visited, Raina would still try again.

And Ishan, without fail, would still come back to the same theorem he claimed they had learned together in class nine. He would say it with such finality that it left no room for argument. Then he would walk away.

For Ishan, it was easier to laugh it off. It was easier to turn everything into a joke. Because some lines were simpler when they were never crossed. And some feelings — however strange, however undefined — were better left exactly where they were.

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He sighed, locked his phone, and whispered to the air:

“Don’t worry, Sachin... this time I knocked on the door.”

Somewhere in the city, fireworks cracked again — more distant this time. Ishan didn’t bother checking the window. He just closed his eyes. And waited — not for a reply, but for the weight to lift.

The party at Sachin’s office was, in all honesty, boring. The music was loud but predictable, the jokes recycled, the conversations revolving around targets, promotions, and office gossip. Sachin stood there, mentally and physically present — nodding at the right moments, smiling when required, holding a glass of whiskey he barely sipped from. He looked like he belonged there, but his mind floated somewhere else entirely.

Across the room, a couple of his female colleagues stole glances at him. One whispered something to another; a small laugh followed. Someone adjusted her hair while passing by him twice. But Sachin was completely unaware. He wasn’t scanning the room. He wasn’t performing. He was simply there — steady, detached, unknowingly drawing attention without asking for it.

Near the snack counter, he bumped into Ankusha. She was animated as always, balancing a plate in one hand and excitement in her voice. “By the way, I shifted,” she announced casually.

“Shifted where?” he asked, polite but neutral.

“To a rented flat. Sharing with a few graduate girls — fresh out of college. It’s chaotic but fun.”

She described the place with enthusiasm — a second-floor apartment in an old building, slightly chipped paint on the walls, narrow staircases that smelled faintly of agarbatti and cooked Maggi. Inside, fairy lights were strung across the balcony grill. The living room had mismatched cushions, a second-hand coffee table, and walls half-covered with sticky notes, quotes, and printed Pinterest aesthetics. One corner had a bean bag that had clearly seen better days.

“There’s always music playing,” she said. “Someone’s always cooking, someone’s always fighting over the bathroom. It’s messy... but alive.”

Sachin pictured it — laughter spilling into the corridor, late-night tea in steel cups, open windows letting in city noise. A temporary kind of freedom. The kind that feels loud and young.

He nodded, half-smiling. “Sounds... lively.”

“It is,” she grinned, studying him for a second longer than necessary.

But even as she spoke, Sachin’s thoughts drifted again — to quieter places. To a bus stand under streetlights. To someone who leaned against him without hesitation.

The party around him grew louder, but inside, he felt strangely distant. He was present in the room — well-dressed, composed, unintentionally admired — yet emotionally anchored somewhere else entirely.

And he didn’t even realize it.

Later that night, he rode his bike back home. The roads were calmer, the air cooler against his face. As he slowed down near a familiar bus stand, something tugged at him. It was the same stop where he and Raina had once stood together, waiting for a traveller van after her office event — not exactly a party, but the culmination of her orientation programme. That night had been long for her, filled with introductions, presentations, polite smiles, and endless small talk.

And she had felt completely out of place. In the middle of that crowd, she had called him.

Sachin had been working then too — files open, deadlines close. He remembered staring at his screen for a second after her call came in. He could have said he was busy. He should have, perhaps. But when she simply asked, “Can you come?” — he didn’t hesitate. For her, he just said yes.

He had reached her office and waited downstairs while the event wrapped up. The lights from the building reflected on the pavement. People walked out in groups, still chatting. And then she appeared.

The moment her eyes found him, the exhaustion on her face softened. She walked straight to him, not caring who was watching, and wrapped her arms around him. That hug had been different. Not dramatic. Not impulsive. Just full of relief.

She didn’t say much — she didn’t have to. He could feel the weight of her long evening in the way she leaned into him. Since his flat was closer, they decided to head there instead of going all the way to her place.

While waiting at that very bus stand, Raina had grown visibly tired. The formal smile she had worn all evening was gone. Without saying anything, she shifted closer and gently rested her head against his arm, just below his shoulder. Even in heels, she could never quite reach his shoulders — something she would tease him about. “You’re unnecessarily tall,” she would complain.

But that night, there was no teasing. Just silence.

Her head resting against him felt small, warm, trusting. Sachin had stiffened for a moment, surprised by how natural it felt. He could sense her breathing slow down, her body relaxing. The world around them — traffic, distant honks, passing headlights — blurred into the background.

And inside him, something shifted.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't sudden. It was like a quiet spark catching flame — a realization that she chose him when she felt vulnerable. That in a room full of people, she had searched for him. That her comfort was tied to his presence.

Stopping at that bus stand now, months later, Sachin let the memory wash over him. He realized that what he had felt that night wasn't just affection. It was protectiveness. It was tenderness. It was the beginning of something deeper — something that made his ordinary days feel fuller.

He started his bike again, but the memory stayed. And somewhere inside, that spark still glowed.

Back at flat

Ishan sat with his phone in hand. The screen still glowed with the message he had read twenty minutes ago, and he still wasn't able to stop smiling.

From *Raina*.

“Yes, I will. But not now. Maybe in the coming time.”

Just that.

But enough to feel something shift inside.

He hadn't expected her to reply at all. But she had. A maybe. A promise half-written.

He stared at the words a while longer, whispered to himself, “About time, traitor.”

Then, pulling his blanket up to his chest, he texted back:

“I'll take that maybe. It's better than another blue tick.”

He put the phone down.

And for the first time in a long time, he fell asleep smiling  
— not because of what had happened, but because of what  
*might*.

# 10

The next morning, the flat had returned to its usual rhythm.

The faint sound of utensils from the kitchen, the low hum of traffic outside, and the quiet clatter of keyboards as the day slowly settled into routine. The warmth and chaos of the previous night had faded into the ordinary calm of weekday life.

Sachin sat at the dining table, laptop open, papers scattered around him. He was halfway through replying to an email when his phone buzzed.

Zara.

He picked it up without hesitation.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning,” Zara replied, her voice carrying that familiar mixture of calm and concern. “Busy already?”

“Always,” Sachin chuckled lightly. “What about you? Didn’t you have classes today?”

“Got cancelled,” she said. “So I thought I’d check on you first.”

Sachin leaned back slightly in his chair.

“I’m alive,” he said with a small smile. “Still pretending to be responsible.”

Zara laughed softly on the other end.

They spoke about ordinary things first — work schedules, a minor argument Zara had with a colleague, Sachin complaining about the ridiculous deadlines his manager had

set for the week. The conversation drifted comfortably, the way it always did with her.

But slowly, almost inevitably, it began circling back to the one thing both of them had been trying not to say out loud. There was a brief silence. Then Zara spoke again, her voice quieter now.

“So... when are you going home next?” Sachin exhaled slowly.

“Soon,” he said. “Maybe next week if I can manage the leave.”

“And you’ll talk to him then?”

“That’s the plan.” Another pause followed.

On the other end, Zara sounded hesitant.

“But the diagnosis?” she asked softly. “How will we... how do we even begin to tell him that we need more tests? That he has to take this seriously?”

Sachin rubbed his forehead, thinking.

“You let me handle that,” he said finally, his voice steadier now. “I’ll go home again soon and also Diwali’s approaching so I will go anyways. I’ll find a way to talk to him. Convince him for the follow-ups.”

He paused, choosing his words carefully.

“But we’ll have to be gentle. With papa, pressure just shuts him down. The moment he feels cornered, he stops listening.”

Zara sighed faintly.

“He still thinks illness is weakness,” Sachin continued. “Especially if someone else has to carry the burden of it.”

The weight of that truth hung between them. For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then Zara’s voice broke slightly.

“And what about you?” she asked. “You’re carrying all of this, Sachin. You never even said how you felt.”

Sachin looked down at the table in front of him — at the scattered papers, the half-written notes, the unfinished email blinking on his screen.

A crooked smile appeared on his face.

“I honestly don’t know what I feel,” he admitted.

“It’s all a mess.”

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. And disconnected the call.

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The gates creaked open just as the first rays of sun splintered through the fog hanging low over the courtyard. Sachin stepped in slowly, almost reverently — the way one enters a shrine. The vastness of the place never failed to overwhelm him. The veranda, the red oxide floor cooling his feet, the knotted banyan tree to the left, leaning like an old guardian of secrets. The kitchen window still bore the scent of turmeric and woodsmoke.

A few birds flitted in the guava tree — the one he’d planted as a boy.

He dropped his duffle bag quietly in the corridor and walked toward the garden first, checking the soil near the hibiscus. He removed the dry leaves. Watered the lemongrass. Ran his hand down the spine of the neem tree as if assuring it he’d returned.

Inside, his father sat on the old wooden armchair, newspaper spread open in his hands though his eyes barely moved across the pages. From the kitchen came the familiar sound of bangles softly clinking against steel utensils as maa moved through her chores.

Sachin stepped inside quietly, greeted his father with a respectful “Namastey, Papa,” and walked straight toward the kitchen. Maa turned the moment she sensed him there, and before she could say anything, he wrapped his arms around her in a long, overdue hug.

“Make two cups of tea, Maa,” he said softly. “One for me and one for Papa.”

Something about today felt heavy. The kind of conversation waiting ahead needed warmth first — something steady to hold onto before words became difficult.

He let out a slow breath and walked back toward the living room.

“Papa,” Sachin called, stopping a few feet away.

“Hm?” his father responded, lowering the newspaper slightly.

Sachin casually asked about chachu.

His father folded the paper onto his lap and replied that chachu had shifted with his family to another rented house. It would make things easier once the property was sold, he explained — less disruption, less tension. He also mentioned that chachu had started exploring job opportunities beyond managing the farms, trying to look for something more stable now.

Sachin, paused and said,

"You're not well," he said gently.

“I’m old,” came the reply.

“No,” Sachin sat beside him, “you’re unwell. There’s a difference.”

Papa didn’t meet his eyes. “And what difference does that make, Sachin? Old age is just illness in slow motion.”

Sachin smiled faintly, but the weight in his eyes stayed.

“I saw the reports. Zara too. You didn’t tell us.”

“I didn’t want to burden anyone.”

“You didn’t want to feel like you needed help.”

Silence.

“I know you, papa,” Sachin said, voice softer now. “I know how much you love this house, the trees, the silence. I love it too. But this house can’t take care of you. And you not going for follow-ups — that’s not strength. That’s stubbornness.”

“I’m fine—”

“You’re not,” Sachin cut in gently but firmly. “And I won’t stand by and watch you pretend everything is okay when it isn’t.”

“I want you to come with me,” Sachin said finally. “To my place. Just for a while. Let me take care of the logistics, of the hospital. Let me do this, papa.”

Still no answer.

“Let me be the son you taught to be responsible. Let me *be* that for you now.”

That broke something. His father’s shoulders dropped. He folded the paper slowly, and Sachin caught the shimmer of moisture in his otherwise unflinching eyes.

“What about this house?” he asked quietly.

“We will sort this issue afterwards,” Sachin said. “But not at the cost of your health. Let’s not let the walls outlive the people who made them home.”

After a long pause, father nodded once — barely — but it was enough.

It was Diwali, and somehow, amidst the lights and noise and rituals, Sachin carried a quiet sense of relief inside him.

Papa agreeing to the check-ups and follow-ups had felt like a small thing on the surface, but to Sachin, it had been a victory of an entirely different kind. Not loud. Not celebratory.

Just deeply personal. The sort of relief that loosened a knot in the chest you had been carrying for months.

The next morning, he went to the market early.

The streets were overflowing with festive chaos — rows of marigold garlands hanging from shopfronts, children running around with toy guns and sparklers, sweet shops crowded to the edge with people carrying brightly packed boxes. The smell of ghee, incense, crackers, and fresh flowers blended into the unmistakable scent of Diwali.

Sachin bought boxes of kaju katli and motichoor laddoos after maa insisted that “festival sweets should come from a proper shop, not fancy packaging.” While walking through the crowded lanes, he kept randomly clicking photos — strings of lights hanging over balconies, an old man arranging diyas, kids bargaining loudly for crackers — and kept sending them to Zara.

She had stayed back because of her semester examinations.

Every few minutes, his phone buzzed with her replies.

You’re doing this on purpose now.

Send food photos also. Let me suffer completely.

I hate all of you.

Sachin smiled to himself almost every time he read her messages.

Ishan, meanwhile, couldn’t afford to go back to his hometown that year. Freelancing work had suddenly picked up, and for the first time in months, projects were coming one after another. He had dramatically announced in the group chat the previous night:

*If you return without sweets, our friendship officially ends.*

To which Sachin had replied:

*Noted. Your loyalty costs one kilo of kaju katli.*

By evening, the house had transformed.

Sachin and maa went door to door in the neighbourhood, distributing sweets in steel plates lined with tissue paper while exchanging warm festival greetings. Back home, they lit diyas together across the courtyard — along the boundary walls, near the tulsi plant, beside the entrance steps. Tiny flames flickered against the deepening evening sky while strings of yellow lights glowed softly around the house.

For the first time in a long while, the home looked alive instead of merely occupied.

That night, maa cooked endlessly despite everyone telling her to sit down and rest. The dining table filled with dishes one after another — shahi paneer, puris, jeera rice, aloo sabzi, boondi raita, and hot gulab jamuns she claimed were “store-bought” despite tasting unmistakably homemade.

Zara video-called during dinner and looked genuinely offended.

“You people are evil,” she complained dramatically from her hostel room. “Do you know what I ate today? Dal and chawal. And even that tasted like emotional damage.”

“The mess workers went home for Diwali,” she groaned. “Half the hostel is surviving on Maggi.”

Maa immediately started insisting she should have come home no matter what, while Sachin deliberately angled the camera toward the food just to irritate her further.

“Sachin, I swear—”

He laughed for what felt like the first honest time in weeks.

The next afternoon felt quieter.

Too quiet.

Sachin packed his father’s bag slowly, folding clothes with unnecessary precision, pausing every few minutes as if delaying the inevitable by a few extra seconds. Medicines. Reports. Water bottle. Shawl. Charger.

Every small thing made the reality settle deeper.

This was no longer just discussion and persuasion.

They were actually going.

When the cab finally arrived outside the house, maa stood near the gate holding the end of her saree tightly in one hand. Sachin helped papa into the backseat before sliding in beside him.

For most of the drive, neither of them spoke much.

Outside, the remains of Diwali still lingered — burnt cracker papers scattered across roads, fading rangolis outside houses, lanterns swaying lazily in the afternoon breeze. Their home slowly disappeared behind the trees lining the road, while maa remained standing near the gate for as long as they could still see her through the rear window, one hand raised in a silent wave.

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The sound of the door unlocking broke the lazy silence of a weekend morning. Zara stepped in, holding a paper bag full of groceries in one hand and a small pot of jasmine in the other. The house smelled faintly of Dettol and freshly brewed tea. The curtains were half drawn.

"Reporting on duty," she called out playfully.

Ishan emerged from the kitchen in shorts and a worn-out T-shirt, wiping his hands on a towel. "Thank God, I thought I'll have to wash spinach today and die a wrinkled, green death."

From the other room, Sachin peeked out, a mild smile stretching across his tired face. "You're early."

"Had to be," Zara said, dropping her bag, "If I waited till the evening, your father would've said I lack sanskaar."

Sachin rolled his eyes fondly. "He doesn't mean half the things he says."

“Maybe,” she said, “but he says all of them loudly.”

The hospital Sachin had selected was reputed — a fortress of white walls, quiet corridors, a constant stream of slippers against the linoleum floor, and muffled announcements in Hindi and English.

The trio had, by now, set up a strange rhythm. Sachin and Ishan had both taken work-from-home one more time. Their backpacks had separate pouches for chargers, medicines, snacks, and yes — their laptops.

Sachin usually took the morning shift — he’d sit with his father for breakfast, then plug in his laptop from the patient lounge area, eyes darting between patient monitors and Slack pings. Ishan took over by noon — balancing his own video calls from the far end of the corridor and whispering snide comments about overpaid bosses and underwhelming coffee.

Their father, though... wasn’t taking it well.

“Hospital food is bland. Even the water tastes like resignation,” he grumbled one morning, spitting a paracetamol back into the cup.

“Papa, please,” Sachin sighed, “just this week and we’ll see.”

“I didn’t raise you to become servants of machines,” he snapped, pointing at the laptops. “This is not *life*.”

Sachin didn’t respond. He let the frustration pass, like the way you do with someone drowning and refusing the rope.

Later, he typed quietly, eyes flicking to the screen, where a presentation on “product market forecasting” felt meaningless against the pale blue walls of the ward.

That afternoon, Zara arrived with home-cooked sambhar and rice. Ishan looked like he might cry. “I was this close to eating a vending machine samosa, Zara. You saved me.”

Sachin’s father, meanwhile, reluctantly tasted the sambhar and said, “Could use more tamarind.”

“Now *he’s* back,” Zara said, laughing.

In the evenings, Sachin often stood outside near the tea stall. The street was dusty, full of honking rickshaws, and smelled like engine oil and wet leaves. Yet it was quiet in its own strange way. He’d sip chai slowly, text Zara, sometimes respond to his manager with brief updates, and sometimes — do nothing.

One evening, Ishan joined him, both staring into the mid-distance.

“He’s improving,” Ishan said softly.

“He’s angry,” Sachin replied.

“He’s scared,” Ishan corrected.

Sachin nodded.

Inside, their father sat on the bed, arms crossed, staring at a wall that held neither clock nor calendar.

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It took almost a week for all the tests to finally be completed.

Blood work, scans, repeat consultations, waiting outside diagnostic rooms that always smelled faintly of antiseptic and exhaustion — the days blurred together in a rhythm of reports, appointments, and cautious conversations. Every doctor seemed to ask for a fresh set of investigations, barely trusting the reports from the previous hospital. One wanted clearer imaging, another questioned the liver markers, a third insisted on repeating blood panels entirely.

Sachin had slowly learned that hospitals functioned on a strange language of “just to be sure.”

By the time discharge formalities were done, papa had already made up his mind.

He didn’t want to stay in the city any longer than necessary.

He had never truly liked it there anyway — the constant noise, the cramped balconies facing each other, the suffocating closeness of buildings that made every life feel overheard. Even the mornings here felt rushed. People walked too fast, spoke too fast, lived too fast.

Papa preferred open skies and silence broken only by birds or distant tractor engines. He preferred familiar faces that stopped to ask how you were instead of strangers brushing shoulders without looking up.

The morning he was supposed to leave, his old brown suitcase lay open across the bed.

The zip was slightly crooked from years of use, one corner faded where the leather had worn thin. Inside, there was already arranged neatly folded cotton kurtas, two pressed shirts, a towel carrying the faint smell of home detergent, and a small steel box of snacks she insisted he keep for the journey.

Beside them sat the medicines prescribed “for the time being” until the remaining reports came in and a more certain diagnosis could be made.

Tablets for sugar regulation. Supplements. Medicines to ease the fatigue and discomfort. Temporary solutions packed in silver strips and labelled carefully despite nobody really knowing yet what the final conclusion would be.

Sachin stood near the cupboard quietly checking everything again.

Prescriptions.

Reports.

Doctor’s notes.

Follow-up dates.

He slipped an extra photocopy of every document into the side compartment of the suitcase — just in case. Hospitals had taught him quickly that papers disappeared exactly when you needed them most.

Papa watched him for a moment before speaking.

“You’ve packed enough documents to admit me into Parliament,” he muttered dryly.

Sachin huffed out a small laugh without looking up.

“Considering how many hospitals don’t trust each other’s reports, I’m not taking chances anymore.”

Papa shook his head lightly, though the faint smile stayed on his face for a few seconds longer than usual.

“Don’t you worry this much,” Papa muttered, zipping the bag himself. “I am fine”

At the railway station, Sachin walked beside him, not too close, not too distant — careful not to make his support look like assistance. Papa didn’t like appearing fragile.

When the train arrived, Sachin lifted the suitcase into the compartment. Papa climbed in steadily, holding the railing firmly.

“Focus on your work,” he said from the window seat. “no need to raise your emotional quotient”

It wasn’t softness. But it wasn’t indifference either. That was his way.

As the train pulled away, Sachin stood still until the last coach disappeared. Papa was going back to the village — back to the courtyard where his wife waited, back to familiar routines, temple bells in the evening, fields stretching beyond sight, and a community that measured strength differently.

-----:)------

Back at the flat, routine tried to settle in again. Mornings resumed — laptops open, the phone with alarms. The house felt functional, but emptier in an invisible way. At work, Sachin began feeling the cracks. Deadlines tightened. Emails piled up. On one particular afternoon, during a review call, his

manager pointed out a minor oversight in a report — something as small as a misaligned chart.

“This isn’t the level we expect, Sachin,” the manager said sharply, in front of the team.

A colleague added, unnecessarily, “We’re all stretched, you know.”

For a split second, heat rose in his chest. He hadn’t slept properly in days. He had been coordinating hospital visits, arranging tickets, managing finances — all while keeping up with work. He could have snapped back.

Instead, he nodded.

“I’ll correct it right away.” And he did.

Later, when a junior team member struggled with client data, Sachin stayed back after hours to help her organize it. His voice remained steady, patient. Even when the world felt unfair, he chose to remain calm, his way of being kind. Not because it was easy. But because that was who he was.

Meanwhile, it was semester break. Zara, restless in her own quiet way, was planning a solo trip to Rishikesh — something only Sachin knew about. She hadn’t told many people. That was the thing about her: she challenged herself privately. She liked testing her courage without applause. It was a regular Wednesday. Ishan had just ended a meeting and was watching eggs boil on the stove, letting the warmth soothe his nerves. Sachin, seated cross-legged on the living room floor with his laptop in front of him, was deep into writing product notes, headphones plugged in, brows furrowed — when his phone began to ring.

It was *maa*.

Her voice was trembling, soft but sharp like cracked glass. “Sachin beta...”

He straightened up. Something about the way she said his name gave him chills.

# 11

“Papa... he’s not doing well. Please come home. It’s urgent.”

The words didn’t register immediately. It felt like the room slowed down — the low hum of the fan, the hiss of chai bubbling over, even the dull city chaos outside.

"How bad?" he asked, standing now.

Maa was crying, holding back more than she was saying.

“He fainted again. And this time, he didn’t respond quickly. I called the doctor. He said we shouldn’t wait. Please... just come.”

Sachin’s heart was pounding. He ended the call and turned to Ishan, who had just entered with two cups of tea. One look at Sachin’s face and he paused, cups still in hand.

“Sachin?”

Sachin’s voice was dry. “We need to go home. Now.” Can not wait for morning.

The call came, and everything shifted within seconds.

Zara was informed first. Her half-packed backpack — meant for her solo trip — lay open on the bed. Clothes that were folded for adventure were now being shoved in with urgency. The trip was cancelled without discussion. There were no complaints, no hesitation. Priorities rearranged themselves instantly.

Sachin stood in the middle of the room for a moment, phone still in his hand, as if his body hadn’t caught up with the news. Then he moved.

He called his manager.

“Sir... I won’t be able to log in for a few days. There’s a family emergency.” His voice, steady at first, cracked midway. He cleared his throat and repeated himself more firmly. There were formal responses on the other end — “Take care,” “Keep us posted.” He barely registered them.

Ishan handled the logistics. Within minutes, tickets were booked — a late-night flight at 11:40 PM to Delhi, followed by a connecting train to their hometown. His movements were quick, efficient, almost mechanical.

The ride to the airport was quiet. Three of them in the cab. Streetlights blurred past like silent witnesses.

Zara leaned her head against the window, eyes wide open but distant, watching the city lights smear into streaks. She wasn’t crying. She was thinking — replaying every recent conversation, every small sign she might have missed. Ishan sat beside her, fidgeting with his headphone cord, one song playing on loop. He wasn’t really listening to it. It was just something to hold on to.

Sachin sat in the front seat. Motionless. His knees bounced unconsciously, jaw clenched so tight it hurt. His eyes were fixed outside — not really seeing the roads, just the darkness swallowing everything beyond the headlights.

Every few minutes, he checked his phone. No new notifications.

Just Maa’s last message:

“He is fine, but not talking much”

He read it again and again, as if the words might rearrange themselves into something more reassuring.

The flight passed in a blur of cabin lights and muffled announcements. None of them slept. At the railway station for their connecting train, the air felt colder than usual. Vendors

shouted for tea; announcements echoed through the platform; life continued as if nothing had happened.

But for them, time had narrowed into one fragile thread. Inside the train compartment, silence settled again.

Zara remained by the window, eyes open, thoughts racing. Ishan stared at his phone screen without scrolling. Sachin sat upright, hands clasped tightly together now, staring into the passing darkness where villages appeared and disappeared like fading memories.

He kept checking his phone. Still nothing.

By the time they reached, Papa had already been taken to the hospital for immediate care. The neighbours had acted quickly; Maa had stayed beside him the entire time.

The hospital corridors smelled of antiseptic and panic. Machines beeped in steady rhythm. For a few terrifying hours, everything felt suspended — doctors moving in and out, nurses adjusting monitors, instructions spoken in clinical calmness.

Sachin stood outside the ICU doors, trying to breathe evenly. Eventually, the doctor stepped out.

“All vitals are stable now,” he said. “It was good you brought him in immediately. We’ve managed the situation.”

After observation and monitoring, and once his vitals remained steady, Papa was discharged with strict instructions — medication on time, follow-up visits without delay, no negligence.

When they finally brought him home, he looked smaller somehow. Weaker. But alive. Present.

And for now, that was enough.

The air in their village home was different — heavier, laced with jasmine and neem, the stillness interrupted only by distant sounds of cows, birds, and an occasional bike engine.

Papa was lying in bed, propped up on pillows. He looked smaller somehow. Not the tall, imposing man Sachin remembered fighting with.

Maa greeted them, eyes swollen from crying, yet managing a tired smile.

“I’m so glad you’re here.”

Sachin nodded and walked in without saying anything.

He found his father looking out of the window at the old mango tree — the one Sachin had once fallen from as a child, the one his father had never cut down despite everyone’s suggestion.

“Papa...”

His father turned slowly. Their eyes met.

“You came,” he whispered.

“For you, always,” Sachin replied, voice breaking.

The house smelled of turmeric and incense. Zara had taken over the kitchen. Ishan was outside, giving space to everyone.

Sachin sat beside his father, until he was asleep, watching him sleep, chest rising and falling like a slow, uncertain tide.

This house had been his battlefield. Where expectations crushed dreams. Where silence roared louder than arguments. Where love was never spoken — only measured in responsibilities.

And yet now, watching his father lie there — vulnerable, mortal — he felt none of that anger. Only fear.

How do you prepare to lose the man you’ve spent your whole life trying to understand?

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the edge of the bed.

And for the first time in years, Sachin whispered softly:

“Please get better, papa. I still need time... with you.”

The house was wrapped in silence — the kind that didn't offer peace, only an uneasy stillness that stretched over everything. The neem branches outside shivered under the weight of the night breeze. The old veranda lights flickered now and then, painting soft amber glows across the courtyard. Inside, everyone had drifted into sleep — Maa on the diwan beside Papa's bed, Zara exhausted from the kitchen and worry, Ishan curled near the back room, probably watching reels till his eyes gave up.

But Sachin couldn't.

He sat on the wooden bench just outside the front door, elbows resting on his knees, head bowed low like he was trying to hide from the gravity of it all — his father's breathless spells, the house filled with medicines, and the haunting realisation that time was slipping through fingers that never stopped holding on.

He looked up. The stars had claimed the sky, quiet and distant. The very air smelled like wet earth, mango leaves, and old sorrow.

His phone buzzed — not a work message, not a call from the hospital, not a forwarded family text about prayers. It was *her*.

Raina.

*"Hi, how are you? Shall we meet?"*

Sachin froze. For a moment, he didn't blink. He just stared at the screen — heart hammering, fingers refusing to move.

That one message — that one name — tore open wounds he had spent two years stitching shut with silence.

Two years.

For the rest of the world, it sounded measurable. Temporary. Survivable.

But for Sachin, those two years had stretched like entire decades lived inside a single breath.

Back then, whenever he got annoyed with Raina over something small — a misunderstanding, an argument, his own stubborn moods — he would disappear for a day or two. Stop replying. Vanish from calls. Pretend he needed “space.”

And Raina would lose her mind every single time.

She would spiral through every possible corner of the internet searching for traces of him. Facebook activity. Instagram likes. Snapchat score. WhatsApp last seen. She would stare at his online status as if willing the green dot to answer her personally.

The cycle was always the same.

First came the messages.

Then the calls.

Then the dramatic GIFs and endless nudges sent through Ishan, who had unwillingly become the minister of reconciliation in their relationship.

And if none of it worked, Raina would show up at his apartment the very next morning, usually too early, carrying anger, panic, and relief all together on her face.

Because she could never survive that silence from him.

It drove her insane every time.

And the moment Sachin finally gave in and opened the door or answered properly again, Raina would immediately throw herself into another argument.

“Sachin, it’s been ten thousand years since you talked to me.” Or “bhot jyada sare din hogye Sachin”, adding all the exaggeration at once.

He would laugh every single time.

“Two days become ten thousand years for you? What an exaggeration you are, Raina.”

And she would glare at him before saying softly, almost stubbornly—

“You won’t understand, Sachin. The one who feels it understands the time.”

Back then, he had laughed it off.

Today, sitting alone with her absence stretching endlessly through his life, Sachin finally understood every word she had meant.

Nothing about it had been exaggeration.

It had simply been love in its purest, most helpless form.

And somewhere within those two years, Sachin had unknowingly become an expert at one thing — living with unfinished conversations.

He had mastered the art of completing sentences Raina never got to finish.

Sometimes while driving.

Sometimes half-awake at night.

Sometimes in the middle of crowded rooms where nobody realised he had drifted somewhere else entirely.

He replied to messages that never came.

Defended himself in arguments that no longer existed.

Imagined her reactions to things she would never see.

He apologised to memories.

Explained himself to silence.

In his head, their conversations had never truly ended. They had simply continued without her voice, with Sachin carrying both sides alone through the empty chambers of his own mind.

Because Raina never did.

Because Raina had vanished — not with a bang, but with a breathless kind of absence that haunted him even in joy.

He swallowed hard.

His thumb hesitated above the keyboard.

*"Okay."*

That's all he replied.

He didn't ask why now.

He didn't ask where or when.

He didn't ask if she was fine.

Because his mind had already raced ahead — sprinting through memories and maybes.

Eventually, the decision was made quietly, almost without debate.

They would move back to Bangalore.

Not permanently perhaps — nobody used words that final yet — but for as long as papa needed proper treatment, regular monitoring, and access to doctors who didn't take three hours and two referrals to reach.

The village had comfort.

It had familiar air, slower evenings, neighbours who checked in without invitation, and mornings that still smelled of wet soil and fresh milk. But comfort could not replace medical support anymore. Not now.

In Bangalore, hospitals were closer. Specialists were accessible. Follow-ups could happen without rearranging entire weeks around travel.

And for the first time, maa would come along too.

Earlier, she had always insisted on staying back to "manage the house," as if houses stopped existing the moment their owners stepped away from them. But this time even she understood things had changed. Her worry now outweighed her attachment to routine.

The interim reports from Bangalore had already arrived.

The final, more detailed report was expected within the next twenty-four hours.

Sachin sat alone when he first opened the file.

The white hospital document glowed harshly against the dim room light while medical terminology crowded the page with exhausting precision.

*Patient diagnosed with progressive fatty liver disease with early cirrhotic changes, suggestive of chronic liver damage associated with long-term metabolic complications and stress-related deterioration.*

The words sat heavily in his chest.

For a long moment, he simply stared.

Not because he hadn't expected something serious — somewhere deep down, he already had — but because seeing fear translated into official language made it impossible to negotiate with anymore.

A diagnosis written by doctors felt colder than worry.

More permanent.

More real.

Sachin closed the file slowly after reading everything twice.

He decided almost immediately that he wouldn't tell papa the full extent of it yet. Not until the final reports arrived. Not until the doctors confirmed the complete picture and a proper treatment plan was laid out.

For now, there was no point filling the house with panic before certainty arrived.

So instead, he focused on practical things.

Medicines.

Appointments.

Diet charts.

Recovery plans.

Small manageable actions that gave the illusion of control.

When maa asked later that evening, “What have they written in the report?” Sachin kept his voice steady.

“They’ve started medications for now. Final report kal aa jayegi. Doctors said we’ll manage it properly from here.”

Maa nodded, trusting him instantly the way mothers sometimes do even when they know their children are hiding pieces of the truth to protect them.

Outside the apartment balcony, Bangalore traffic continued endlessly below — impatient horns, blinking headlights, people rushing toward lives still moving normally.

Inside, however, time had begun rearranging itself around medicines, reports, and the quiet hope that treatment had not started too late.

The idea of shifting wasn’t simple.

Papa resisted at first — he didn’t want to leave his routine, his people, the familiarity of his mornings. Maa worried about locking up the house for too long. But practicality won. Medicines had to be monitored. Tests had to be repeated. Delays were no longer an option.

So bags were packed again — this time not in panic, but with a heavy understanding that life was changing.

Amidst all of this, Sachin also knew something else with quiet certainty.

If Raina had asked to meet, it would never be impulsive. That’s how she was.

She would inform him in advance — always giving space for him to arrange his work, clear his schedule, breathe. She was thoughtful like that. She understood the personal and professional commitments. If she said, “Let’s meet,” it meant she had already considered his commitments, already made room for him in her own day.

It would never be a rushed, on-the-spot meeting. With Raina, things were deliberate.

And Sachin, even in the middle of hospital visits, shifting plans, and family responsibilities, found a strange calm in that predictability.

*Was she here because she missed him?*

*Was it guilt? Nostalgia? Or maybe a misunderstanding to clarify after all these years?*

*Would she talk about the ghosting? Or pretend like none of it happened?*

*Would she look the same? Laugh the same? Could he look at her without breaking again?*

His brain went into overdrive, composing every possible script — the angry one, the tender one, the indifferent one. Because that's what heartbreak taught you — how to be your own closure. Your own defence lawyer. Your own saboteur. Whereas, the bitter truth is — “closure is an illusion”.

He leaned back, head touching the pillar behind him, and sighed deep. The kind of sigh that didn't lighten anything — just reminded you how heavy your chest had been all this while.

Somewhere in the next room, his father stirred in his sleep. A faint groan echoed.

Sachin didn't move.

He just whispered to himself — a truth, a confession, a long-overdue lament:

*"How do you prepare yourself to face the very person who taught you how to feel, and then left before you learned how to stop?"*

The night grew darker, but inside him, a light flickered again — dim, unsure, but undeniable.

Raina was coming.

And he had said “okay.”

Even when nothing in him was okay.

He fought with himself the whole night.

Why now, Raina?

Why after years of silence, why after burying your ghost in every corner of his memory — did she choose *now* to surface?

When *Papa* was not well. When the fear of *losing* was more real than any romantic grief.

When his mind was a tightrope and his heart — already stretched thin between duty, guilt, and the heavy ache of growing up too fast.

Sachin clenched his fists on the bench. The cold night pierced through the cotton of his kurta, but he didn't feel it.

His skin had become familiar with silence. His bones had learned endurance.

He murmured again — not as a complaint, but as truth: "*Why now?*"

But then, the other voice inside him — the one that always came softly, when he thought he couldn't bear anymore — whispered: *Because you are strong enough now.*

Stronger than heartbreak. Stronger than silence. Stronger than even your own questions.

And *yes*, he was.

The next morning, the house was abuzz again — with the luggage being packed, medications cross-checked, Maa calling relatives about the farmwork, Zara making sure every report was safely tucked into her bag.

By the next day, they had all returned to Bangalore.

And just like that, the cycle resumed — hospital calls, medicines lined beside water bottles, follow-up appointments marked carefully on calendars, reminders set on phones, reports folded inside transparent folders that somehow always remained within reach.

Life moved again, but differently now.

Bangalore welcomed them with its familiar weather — breezy evenings, sudden drizzles, and that soft lingering chill in the air that never fully became winter yet somehow wrapped around the city like one. The cold November nights of the village were left far behind now — behind the open farms disappearing into fog at dawn, behind the creaking wooden doors of the old ancestral house, behind the silence that arrived naturally there after sunset.

Maa reacted to the change almost like a child experiencing something magical for the first time.

One moment she stood on the balcony wrapped in her shawl, surprised that the wind here carried coolness without the harsh bite of village winter, and the next she kept peeking outside every few minutes just to watch the city lights flicker beneath the misty evening sky.

“It feels strange,” she murmured once. “As if someone changed the entire season overnight.”

To Sachin, her wonder felt oddly innocent — like she had walked through a fast-forward transition scene in a movie where landscapes changed before the mind could fully catch up.

But perhaps life itself was nothing more than a long transition.

People spent years believing certain versions of themselves would last forever, until one day they quietly didn’t.

Maa and papa, who had once been the foundation beneath every decision their children made, now paused before even the smallest choices, waiting for Sachin to tell them what should be done next.

What medicine to take.

Which doctor to trust.

Whether reports looked serious.

Whether things would become alright.

There was something unbearably humbling about watching parents slowly place their certainty into their children's hands.

Once young and effortlessly capable, they now moved carefully around exhaustion and medicines.

Once full of plans, routines, and loud confidence, they now measured days through blood pressure readings, sugar levels, and follow-up dates.

The same hands that had once held the family together without complaint now trembled slightly while opening medicine strips.

And somewhere amidst all of this, Sachin began noticing how aging rarely arrived dramatically.

It happened quietly.

In pauses between conversations.

In slower walks to the dining table.

In fathers asking sons to read medical reports aloud because the words had become too exhausting to understand alone.

The appointments.

The hospital visits.

The MRI scans.

The days when Papa would smile like nothing hurt, and nights when his groans would echo across the flat.

The forced arguments over who's turn it was to cook khichdi.

The tea over sleepy laptop meetings.

The whispered moments between Zara and Sachin, figuring out which medication caused less side-effects.

The quiet glances between Ishan and Maa when she struggled to accept that *this* — this uncertain rhythm — was their new normal.

And beneath all this, like a soft drumbeat under a storm — the wait. The *never-ending* wait for Raina's *next* message.

Not because he had hopes, he didn't dare allow that, But because something about her sudden appearance... felt like a door had been cracked open in a room Sachin had long sealed shut.

And now, every time his phone buzzed — every time a notification chimed — every time a shadow crossed the window — his heart asked the same question: "*Is it her again?*"

But it never was. Not yet.

Just the regulars — clinic updates from the hospital portal, work reminders blinking in red, Ishan's random memes arriving at the most inappropriate times, Zara's neatly typed grocery lists, Maa's forwarded bhajan videos with folded-hand emojis and "Good Morning" written in glittering fonts.

Nothing unexpected.

And yet, a part of him kept checking. Not for urgency. Not for news. For her.

He knew her texting style too well. The exaggerated spellings that revealed her mood without her ever stating it — "heyyy" when she was playful, "okkayy" when she was pretending not to be upset, "hmm." when something was clearly wrong. The extra vowels, the delayed replies, the sudden flood of messages — all of it spoke a language only he seemed to notice.

And the way she said "bye." It was never abrupt. Never careless. It lingered — "byee," or sometimes "bye :)" — like a quiet assurance that the conversation wasn't ending, just pausing. Like a promise that she would return.

He told himself he wasn't waiting. But his thumb hovered over the chat anyway. Because some habits aren't loud. They're just quietly hopeful. Because maybe... just maybe, the past wasn't done speaking yet.

Sachin was holding everything like an overfilled glass of hot water — trembling hands, burnt fingers, careful steps. One wrong tilt, and it would all spill.

Here in Bangalore, the calendar was unforgiving. Mornings began not with alarms, but with hospital queues. Afternoons melted into silent pharmacy counters. Evenings were spent in muted exchanges with doctors. Nights... nights had become a blur of Zoom meetings, unfinished reports, and late dinners reheated twice.

At work, his manager had given him the polite version of a warning —

“We understand your family situation, Sachin, but this pitch needs your leadership. You’re the core person. Don’t lose grip now.”

He tried. He really did. He logged in on time, kept his face cam-on during meetings, muttered corporate optimism like— “We can turn this delivery around,” “Let’s sync the timelines,” “Yes, I’ll send the final deck tonight.”

All this while keeping one eye on his father’s medicine box and the other on Ishan, who had started noticing Sachin’s uncharacteristic silences. It was Zara who finally sat him down and said softly, “You’re not a one-man army, Sachin. Don’t act like one.” But he had to be. Because *someone* had to be. Yet, even armies have fault lines.

-----:)------

On Wednesday night, his phone buzzed — again — amidst a team call.

He saw the name.

Raina.

# 12

He didn't open it right away.

He stared at the screen while his junior analyst explained a budgeting error, nodding at the camera, but barely hearing a word.

After the call ended, he locked himself in the bathroom for a moment of breath. Then he tapped the message open.

Raina:

*Let's meet on Thursday? I'll wait for you outside DYU Art Café, Koramangala. 5 p.m. I hope that works for you?*

He stared.

Read it once.

Then again.

And again.

He didn't respond.

He couldn't.

Because Thursday he had:

- A client feedback meeting at 11 a.m.
- A follow-up at Hospital by 3 p.m.
- Two feedback mails to be sent to HR.
- And a father who still refused to acknowledge how tired his body had become.

Sachin locked the phone and placed it face down.

His mind began doing what it always did, instead of laying out excuses, explanations, timelines, to make it work, to

prioritize his people. And Raina, well she is not just people, she is her everything may be more than everything.

He wanted to scream at that hope. Shake it off. Be cold. Be firm. Be *reasonable*.

But he couldn't.

Because he remembered her always waiting — outside apartment, near the bus stop, on metro station, just for him. Always gentle, always quiet. But waiting, nonetheless.

And this wasn't just Raina showing up.

This was the past... tapping on his shoulder. Asking to be looked at.

Sachin rubbed his eyes and returned to the hall.

His laptop screen still glowed. His team still pinged him. His father, snoring softly on the couch.

And in the middle of it all — Sachin stood like a seesaw. Between duty and desire. Between old promises and new pains.

Tomorrow will be Thursday.

And part of him already knew — no matter how fast time tried to pull him forward — he'd glance back.

Even if just once.

-----:)------

Sachin woke up like a soldier reporting for duty— A mental checklist already scrolling in his head before he even stepped out of bed, making necessary changes

1. Team stand-up at 9.
2. Hospital follow-up at 11:30.
3. Finance review meeting at 2.
4. Dad's medicine pickup.
5. ...5 p.m. — Raina.

He didn't say a word to anyone about that last entry. Not to Zara, who had just brewed him chai and caught him staring too long into the steam. Not to Ishan, who threw a tired joke his way—

“Man, even your dark circles have started networking. They’ve made circles of their own.”

Sachin laughed — out of habit more than humour — and kept sipping.

At the hospital, he sat beside his father, silent, as the nurse changed the saline. His father, ever the old-school patriarch, grumbled about the food, the smell of sanitizer, the waste of time.

But Sachin saw through it. He saw a man worn out and scared, camouflaging it with irritation.

“Any new tests today?” his father asked, eyes closed.

“Just a few. I’ll check with the doctor,” Sachin replied softly, adjusting his blanket.

His watch blinked: *1:48 p.m.* He had to leave soon.

Work awaited — an excel sheet bleeding with revisions and deadlines.

He opened his laptop in the hospital waiting lounge, hot spotting from his phone, typing with one hand, sipping vending machine coffee with the other.

“Sachin, we’ll need your sign-off before 4,” the Slack message blinked.

“Sure,” he typed, even though he knew— by 4, he’d be halfway to the venue.

He couldn't explain it to anyone — why this meeting felt heavier than any project deadline or hospital bill.

He hadn't seen Raina in years. And yet, his phone hadn't left his pocket since morning. He kept checking the time like a teenager. He hadn't decided what he would say. He wasn't

even sure what he *wanted* from the meeting. Closure? Clarity? Catharsis?

But what he did know — he wouldn't cancel. Not this. Not her. Because that's just how Sachin was wired.

He'd juggle spreadsheets and saline bottles, deadlines and doctor's notes— but the one thing he wouldn't do is leave someone waiting. Especially *her*.

At 4:10 p.m., he closed his laptop.

Texted Ishan,

“Will be late tonight. Don't wait for dinner.”

And stepped out.

The metro ride was quiet. Crowded but quiet. He didn't plug in his earphones. He needed to hear the world —The rush of doors sliding open, the hum of the track, the unfiltered noise of life.

Because inside him, everything had gone still.

By 4:57, Sachin was walking down the narrow lane leading toward DYU Art Café, his sneakers brushing softly against the uneven stone pathway dampened by the evening air.

He had dressed simply.

A white kurta with sleeves folded carelessly till his forearms, faded denim jeans, and worn-out sneakers that had clearly survived years of Bangalore roads and late-night walks. His curly hair remained exactly the way it had always been — untamed, slightly messy, refusing discipline no matter how many times people suggested a proper haircut. The beard was still uneven around the jawline, still slightly overgrown.

On his left wrist rested the same old watch.

Beneath it, veins stood visible against his skin, his hand faintly damp from nervous sweat despite the cool breeze.

Those hands.

Strong hands that had once held Raina's instinctively in crowded streets and traffic crossings. Fingers that had fit between hers so naturally it had stopped feeling like an action and become muscle memory instead.

Raina used to love this exact version of him.

The white kurta.

The curls.

The watch.

Even the untrimmed beard she constantly pretended to complain about before eventually running her fingers through it absentmindedly while talking.

And perhaps that was why he had chosen this today.

Not to impress her.

Not to recreate something romantic from the past.

But because somewhere over the years, her love had quietly become preservation.

The things she once praised had remained untouched long after she left, as though parts of him still continued living according to the memory of her affection.

The early Bangalore evening moved around him in its familiar rhythm.

Distant traffic hummed endlessly beyond the quieter lanes of Koramangala. Somewhere nearby, fresh filter coffee was brewing, its warmth blending into the cool air. The scent of rain still lingered faintly from an afternoon drizzle, settling over wet leaves, old walls, and café windows glowing amber against the approaching dusk.

For a brief moment, the city looked exactly the same as it had years ago.

Only the people inside it had changed.

As he walked toward the café, another memory rose quietly to the surface.

Their first meeting after school was planned at a café. Since Sachin and Raina shared the same metro route, Raina decided to wait for him at the common station so they could travel together to the venue. Ishan, meanwhile, was occupied elsewhere and had planned to meet them directly at the café later.

It had been at Indiranagar Metro Station, on a mildly chaotic Saturday evening. The city was its usual self — announcements echoing in Kannada, Hindi, and English; the metallic screech of trains arriving; commuters rushing past in office formals and weekend casuals.

Raina had messaged, *“I’m here.”*

When Sachin reached the station, he spotted her almost immediately.

She was standing near one of the pillars on the platform, slightly away from the crowd. A soft blue kurti, denims, hair loosely tied but already escaping at the sides because of the humidity. A canvas tote bag hung from her shoulder. He was about to walk straight up to her — but then she did something that made him pause.

She took out a novel.

Not her phone.

A novel.

She flipped to a page with folded end inwards and began reading, completely absorbed within seconds. The world around her dissolved. Trains came and went. Announcements played. Someone brushed past her shoulder. She didn’t flinch.

Sachin had already arrived. But instead of going to her, he stayed back. Just a few steps behind. He watched her.

The way her eyebrows moved subtly with the story. The way she shifted her weight from one foot to the other without lifting her eyes from the page. The way her lips pressed together slightly when something intense must have happened in the chapter. There was something deeply peaceful about it — about how she could create her own quiet space in the middle of Bangalore’s noise.

He felt... strangely warm. Just quietly in awe.

After a minute — or maybe two — he walked forward and stood beside her. She didn’t notice.

He stood there, close enough to see the name of the book, close enough to hear her soft breathing, and still — she didn’t acknowledge anyone’s presence. That was how deeply she disappeared into stories.

He smiled to himself. Then he gently tapped her shoulder. She looked up suddenly, blinking once as if returning from another world.

“Oh! You just came?” she said instinctively.

He almost laughed. He had been there. Watching her. Memorizing her.

But he only nodded. “Yeah, just now.”

She folded the end of the page inwards carefully, closed the novel, and smiled — that small, unguarded smile that made everything around feel lighter.

He didn’t tell her that he had arrived earlier. He didn’t tell her that he had stood there simply to see her being herself. He kept that memory quietly locked away. Not because it was grand. But because it was the first time he realized — she had a way of making ordinary places feel like something worth remembering.

Sachin's heart whispered the question his lips never had the courage to ask:

*Why now?*

Sachin was late. Eight minutes late by the clock, but years late by the weight of silence.

Raina stood just outside the café, phone in hand, her gaze flickering between the door and the street beyond it. She had already called him once, and the moment her name flashed on Sachin's screen, everything inside him short-circuited.

His thumb accepted the call, but the rest of him lagged behind. Her voice hit him like lightning — sudden, familiar, too loud and too soft at once.

“Sachin?”

He didn't hear anything after that.

The words she spoke blurred into white noise. His veins turned molten. His brain jammed under the surge of blood pulsing through his ears. His throat dried like a sand dune in mid-June.

“I'll... I'll be there in ten,” he mumbled — barely audible even to himself — and hung up.

He quickened his pace, almost half-walking, half-rushing now, his breath falling out of rhythm with his stride.

And then he spotted her.

Standing near the old lantern-lit entrance of the café, arms crossed tightly against herself.

She wore a saree with a white base and deep red checks, draped effortlessly as if she had worn confidence along with it. The blouse — or maybe a crop top, Sachin honestly couldn't tell anymore — was sleeveless with a halter neckline that somehow made her look softer and intimidating at the same time.

Bold bangles adorned her right wrist.

On her left hand rested the same old watch he had gifted her on her birthday years ago.

Small jhumkis brushed lightly against her neck whenever she moved, and right above her brows sat a tiny red bindi that pulled his attention back to her face every single time.

God.

She looked like the kind of woman who had probably fired someone ten minutes ago and walked away without looking back.

That expression on her face — sharp, impatient, visibly annoyed — should have intimidated him.

Instead, Sachin almost smiled.

Because that look was so painfully *her*.

He knew her well enough to understand that this was never really anger about waiting. Raina hated waiting, yes, but what unsettled her more was the feeling of losing control over situations. The moment things stopped going according to plan, irritation would begin building inside her until she eventually exploded into long dramatic rants in front of him.

And every single time, Sachin would make the mistake of responding logically.

Trying to explain.

Trying to solve.

Trying to reason.

Which only irritated her further.

“You understand nothing about what I’m saying,” she would snap, throwing her hands in frustration. “You’re a moral compass, Sachin. I don’t need solutions right now. I need a bitching queen.”

And while she continued ranting passionately about people, situations, managers, relatives, traffic, or life itself —

Sachin would sit there quietly overwhelmed by how adorable she looked while being angry.

That had always been his problem.

He loved her in every form too much to take her anger seriously.

But today was different.

Today, standing a few feet away from her after two years of silence and unfinished memories, Sachin realised something unsettling.

He had rehearsed absolutely nothing.

"You knew I would be waiting for you today... and still, you were late." Her tone was light, but the sting in her words was sharp.

"What is this, Sachin? The same old complain..." She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to.

And Sachin— He didn't say anything either. Not about the draining hospital shifts, Not about the sleepless nights spent pacing verandas, Not about his father's illness or the juggling act his life had become.

He simply smiled. That same old warm, faintly tired smile— Like he had been waiting for this complaint from her all along.

They walked in. The café was tucked away like a secret in a storybook lane. Walls hung with macramé planters and fairy lights. Wooden chairs painted mismatched pastels, A wall full of sticky notes with strangers' anonymous wishes —

"I hope he reads the letter I never sent."

"Please let me crack the UPSC."

"meh tennu fer milangi."

Soft jazz music floated in the air — the kind of tunes that made you think of soft rains and old heartbreaks.

Raina chose a corner seat by the window. She always liked corners — Secure, with a full view of the world but untouched by it.

Sachin sat opposite her, the small wooden table between them suddenly feeling too narrow and too wide at the same time. He wasn't sure where to rest his eyes — on her face, which felt dangerously familiar, or on the rain-speckled glass window beside her, where droplets traced slow, uncertain paths downward.

The café hummed softly around them — the smell of filter coffee, muted conversations, the faint clatter of cups. Outside, Bangalore's evening rain had begun again, gentle but persistent.

He cleared his throat slightly. From beside his chair, he lifted a single flower. A yellow chrysanthemum.

For a second, she just looked at it.

The tradition had always been a red rose. It had almost become an unspoken ritual between them — red meant warmth, certainty, unfiltered affection.

But today wasn't red. Today was something else. Yellow wasn't accidental. It wasn't random either. It was his quiet rebellion. He didn't want to break his ritual entirely — he still came with a flower. That part of him would never disappear. But he also wanted it to say something honest. That he was hurt. That he was angry. That being left behind the way he had been had not been easy.

And yet, he was here. Angry, but present. Hurt, but choosing her anyway.

There was something almost beautiful about that — the contradiction of it. To feel wounded and still show up. To carry disappointment and still extend a hand. To come back with a flower even when part of you wanted to stay distant.

He placed the chrysanthemum gently on the table and slid it toward her.

“I didn’t feel like red today,” he said quietly.

Raina’s fingers hovered over the petals before touching them. She didn’t smile immediately. She understood. She always did. This was Sachin. He didn’t storm out. He processed. He felt deeply. And then — no matter how shaken — he returned.

That was the part of him she had always respected in a way that ran deeper than romance.

He came back. Not because he was weak. But because he was strong enough to choose connection over ego.

Raina had never been fully sure of herself. She second-guessed decisions. She wrestled with her own fears. She sometimes walked away before she felt she might be abandoned.

But with him?

With him, she could close her eyes and trust. Not blindly in the world — but blindly in him. She knew he would show up. Even if he was angry. Even if he was tired. Even if loving her required patience.

That steady return, that quiet integrity, was one of Sachin’s richest traits. It wasn’t loud. It wasn’t dramatic. But it was rare.

And it was that very steadiness that had given her the courage to fall in love completely. Not because he promised forever. But because he proved, again and again, that when things broke — he didn’t run. He stayed.

She asked him about home.

His job.

His health.

As if they had just caught up last weekend and not been ghosted out of each other’s lives for years.

Sachin answered like he was in an interview.

Honest.

Polite.

Holding back a hundred other questions battling inside him.

*Why are you here?*

*Why now?*

*Do you know what you left behind?*

*Do you know what you took with you?*

But Raina spoke like nothing ever happened. Like silence hadn't ever bruised them. Like her absence hadn't been a slow-burning wound for two people— not just one.

And that confused Sachin all over again. Was this just a casual check-in? A friendly meeting? An unspoken attempt at closure?

Or worse —Was this drama? A scene stitched out of guilt or nostalgia?

Because her questions were normal, but everything about *her showing up* — Wasn't.

And Sachin sat there, his tea untouched, holding that same old smile, Even as his heart started setting fire to every page he'd once folded away. Sachin sat across from her, shoulders straight, posture rigid, the way someone sits when they're too aware of themselves—when they've rehearsed every possible version of a moment and yet find themselves blank at its arrival.

Raina stirred her cappuccino slowly, eyes on the cream swirl at the surface, not him. The silence was thin, almost breakable, but she let it linger like it was an old friend. Sachin didn't even lift his cup. His mind played a dozen tapes at once.

He looked at her— Not like a lover might after years. But like someone witnessing a dream long enough to wonder if it was ever real.

Raina looked... the same. Her hair a little longer maybe. Or maybe it was tied differently. No makeup, no layers, just her. The raw, unchanged version. The one who used to show up in corridors with coffee she didn't drink herself, only because he liked the one from that particular stall.

She glanced up.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like I'm a puzzle you're too tired to solve," she smiled, gently.

Sachin blinked, awkwardly shifting his eyes to the table.

He wanted to say, *Because I thought you were gone for good. Because you vanished without an answer. Because I stayed behind picking up pieces you never admitted were scattered.*

But he didn't say any of that. Instead, he asked, "You still carry sugar sachets in your bag?"

Raina raised her brow, mildly amused. "You remembered that?"

"I remembered everything." It slipped out.

She looked at him now, directly. He didn't flinch, but the weight of that gaze knocked into something old inside him. Somewhere between nostalgia and ache.

"How's Ishan?" she asked. The shift in conversation felt abrupt.

"He's fine," Sachin replied, quiet. "Recovering."

"He told me..." she paused, placing the cup down, "...that you never stopped waiting."

Silence again. This time heavier.

Sachin nodded faintly. "He says things sometimes."

She leaned back, as if needing space from that sentence. "You think I wanted to disappear?"

"I don't know what you wanted, Raina."

His voice was not bitter. Not even angry.

Just... calm. Defeated. Like someone who'd run too many miles only to be told the race never existed.

She didn't respond.

Outside the window, a little boy pressed his nose to the glass of a parked car, fogging it up with breath and scribbling nonsense with his finger.

Inside, two people tried not to rewrite a history neither of them fully understood.

"I messaged you the week I left..." she started slowly.

Sachin's eyes sharpened. "You didn't."

"I did. You never replied."

"Because I never got it."

Raina bit her lower lip, rummaging her memory. "It was a long message. I remember typing it at night... I was scared. I couldn't explain."

He gave a faint nod, more to himself than her.

Maybe that message was never delivered. Maybe it was deleted before being sent. Maybe the network gods didn't think it mattered. Or maybe she's just saying it now, to create a soft exit.

He didn't know anymore.

"Sometimes," he said slowly, "the way people leave teaches you more about them than the way they stay."

Raina inhaled sharply. "That's not fair."

"Neither was the silence."

Another pause. Long and stretched, this one was not comfortable.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," she said finally.

"I know."

He believed her. But belief doesn't always come with healing.

They both sat in that confused in-between, the air filled with memory, regret, and the bitter-sweet taste of coffee that had gone cold.

Raina's voice faltered before she could even finish her sentence.

"It was me... I couldn't take it all. Everything around me felt like it was closing in... dark, suffocating. I didn't want to drag you into that. I thought... I thought if I stayed away, you'd be spared."

Her throat tightened. The tears gathered in her eyes, shimmering, but never quite spilling over.

She wasn't falling apart in any visible way. She was folding inward—slowly, almost invisibly—like someone who had practiced this kind of quiet breaking for years and had learned how to make it look composed.

Her fingers began to fidget. First gently, then restlessly. She always did that when something hurt more than she could admit. When the words in her head refused to line up into something that made sense. When her tears rose not to her eyes, but lodged stubbornly in her throat, choking every sentence before it could be spoken.

Sachin noticed everything.

The way her shoulders grew smaller. The way she blinked too often. The tremor she tried to hide by clasping her hands together. He wanted to reach out—place his hand over hers like he used to, steady her, anchor her.

But he didn't.

Maybe he couldn't. Or maybe he chose not to.

Still, he saw it all. And for a moment, his own exhaustion, his endless waiting, his private grief—everything receded into the background. Her silent struggle took centre stage. It always did.

That was who Sachin had always been. Soft in the places that mattered. Genuine to a fault. Loving, even when it cost him. He listened without interrupting, without moving. Then his voice came through—low, weighted, carrying more than just words.

“I was there for you. You knew that.” He wasn’t whispering. He wasn’t angry.

He was tired. “I *was* there for you, Raina. Still am. Do you have any idea what it felt like to call you again and again, knowing I’ll hear nothing? To write those long texts thinking maybe, *maybe* this one will make you respond?” He paused, his voice tightening. “You didn’t just ghost me... you ghosted Ishan too. What had *he* done? He was your friend. Just like that—cut off. And you’re telling me now, it was to protect us from your darkness? How is that fair?”

Raina had no reply. None that she could say without guilt splashing all over the floor.

She just looked at her watch, almost too quickly. “It’s... it’s getting late. I need to be home by eight,” she said, standing.

Sachin stood too, slowly, as if leaving his seat meant accepting some kind of truth he wasn’t ready for.

They walked out of the café— not like lovers who met after years, not like friends either.

Two people, who once shared something so deep, now walking in silence with a chasm between them too wide to name. Outside, the breeze had turned cooler. The sun had dropped behind the buildings and the streetlamps flickered on, painting the pavement in gentle orange. At the gate, she turned to him and smiled—weak, apologetic. He managed to return it. A smile not of happiness, but of survival. Of seeing her alive, talking, sipping coffee—just like old times. She left.



### ***Saved***

*I want to be saved  
 Saved from myself  
 Because I no longer have faith in me  
 I am an destructive soul  
 With selfish means  
 I devour over my loved ones  
 And eat up their happiness  
 And leave them with no opinions  
 I am scared of my version  
 Because I afraid to move on like this A human flesh  
 But a monster beneath More over  
 I am not afraid for my self  
 I am afraid for my dear ones  
 One who loves me unconditionally  
 But I end up limiting their care  
 I end up messing them up  
 I am scared they will leave me*

*So the loop goes on and on and on  
And it's tiring for them  
Forget about me  
Because I am waiting for that day  
When my identity will turn into ashes  
And that will be the day  
I will no longer be afraid of myself  
But yes no longer needed to be saved as well*

# 13

Sachin stood at the same spot for a few moments, looking in the direction she had gone.

He didn't know what it meant. He didn't know what she wanted. But one thing he did know— He was still holding on, even if she wasn't asking him to.

He took the metro to the station where he had parked his bike earlier. The train moved in its usual rhythm, doors opening and closing, announcements echoing in the background. People stood around him, lost in their own worlds — scrolling, staring, leaning against poles with tired expressions. Sachin stood near the door, holding the railing lightly. His head felt dizzy. Not physically ill — just overwhelmed. His mind kept replaying Raina. He looped those moments again and again until they began to blur at the edges, almost unreal. So much so that it started to feel like a dream — something imagined rather than lived.

He took out his phone. Opened their chat. Nothing new. No message. No reconsideration. No hesitation. He stared at the empty screen for a few seconds longer than necessary. Then, against his better judgment, he typed: *Text me once you reach home.* He knew he shouldn't have. But habit sometimes overpowers dignity. The message sent. Within seconds, the double tick turned blue. She had seen it. He waited. One stop passed. Then another. No reply. The absence of response stung — not sharply anymore, but familiarly. He had grown used to this quiet. Used to being read and left unanswered.

A faint smile appeared on his lips — not because it was funny, but because sometimes the only way to hold pain is to disguise it as composure. He swallowed that smile down. It felt heavy in his throat. The metro announced his station. He stepped off, walked toward the parking lot, and unlocked his bike. The night air brushed against his face as he put on his helmet. For a moment, he looked at his phone again. Still nothing. He slipped it back into his pocket, started the engine, and rode away — carrying with him the silence that had begun to feel louder than words.

Sachin returned to the flat, the keys jangling softly in his hands like a tune that didn't quite belong to the silence waiting on the other side of the door.

The lock clicked open with a faint creak.

Immediately, the familiar smell greeted him — medicines, Dettol, and burnt incense sticks lingering together in the air, creating that strange scent homes slowly develop when illness becomes part of daily life.

The apartment was quiet.

Too quiet.

Ishan wasn't home yet. He had probably stopped somewhere to pick up dinner or was still stuck at the office finishing work before heading back.

Sachin didn't sit, didn't change, didn't even glance at his phone. He simply placed the keys on the table, washed his face with cold water as if that could rinse away the layers of emotional fatigue, and walked out again—this time to the hospital. He reached the hospital, navigating through the white-lit corridors and the sharp scent of antiseptics, until he reached the familiar room. His father lay on the bed, sleeping—or maybe just pretending to sleep, as he often did.

The doctors had advised that papa remain admitted for at least twenty-four hours under continuous observation once

the medications were started. But twenty-four hours quietly became longer discussions, additional monitoring, repeat blood work, and extended supervision after the reports showed that the liver condition had progressed further than initially expected.

The fatty liver disease had now advanced into early cirrhotic changes, and complications had begun affecting his metabolism and overall body functioning. His liver enzymes remained unstable, sugar levels fluctuated unpredictably, and the constant fatigue he had ignored for months was no longer something the doctors were willing to dismiss casually.

They wanted to observe how his body responded to the medicines before allowing discharge.

“This is all business,” he muttered from the hospital bed while adjusting the thin blanket over himself. “Doctors know how to keep patients admitted and increase irrelevant bills. And you children don’t understand these tricks.”

Sachin, who had now heard versions of this exact dialogue at least ten times in forty-eight hours, simply nodded absentmindedly while checking the chart kept near the bed.

“Hmm.”

“I’m serious,” papa continued. “I’m absolutely fine now. Look at me.”

“You said the same thing before the tests too.”

Papa clicked his tongue in irritation and looked away dramatically toward the window.

The hospital room smelled faintly of sanitizer and stale air-conditioning. Machines beeped softly somewhere outside while nurses moved through corridors with practiced urgency. Evening light filtered weakly through the blinds, falling across the untouched fruit bowl relatives had sent earlier in the day.

Ignoring papa’s continuous protests, Sachin focused instead on what actually mattered now.

Today's vitals looked slightly better.

Blood pressure more stable.

Sugar levels less erratic compared to admission day.

The fatigue still lingered heavily, but at least he had eaten properly in the afternoon without nausea.

Small improvements.

Tiny victories.

The kind people celebrated quietly when recovery became uncertain enough to make ordinary things feel precious again.

Sachin noted everything carefully while the doctor explained the next phase of treatment — strict dietary restrictions, reduced stress, complete avoidance of unhealthy oils and irregular meals, timely medication, and long-term monitoring to slow the progression of liver damage.

For the first time in days, Sachin allowed himself a cautious breath of relief.

Not hope entirely.

But maybe the beginning of it.

His phone blinked with Raina message, reached". He saw the message and kept it inside, as if his seen status was in itself a reply to Raina.

Sachin pulled a chair, careful not to make noise. He sat beside the bed, elbows on knees, hands locked together as if in prayer. The monitor beeped a slow rhythm. The oxygen tube hissed quietly. And his father's chest rose and fell with a stubbornness that mirrored his own.

He looked at him-That weathered face, lined not just with age but with unspoken disappointment, unshared burdens, and the weight of an entire family.

For a long time, Sachin just stared. Then his thoughts began their quiet monologue.

*Was this bitterness towards life? Towards unfulfilled dreams? Was it about the setbacks—the failed crops, the lost land, the shift from village to city life, or just the gradual erosion of control over the world he once ruled in silence? Or... was it me? Did I become too different, too distant? Too much like the man he never became?*

Or maybe—*He was always like this. A man who loved through restrictions, who cared in silence, who showed affection in criticism and concern in harshness.*

The room was too quiet, so quiet that even the beeping monitor began to sound like thunder in his ears. Sachin leaned back and closed his eyes—not to sleep, but just to escape the heaviness sitting on his shoulders. He didn't process Raina's words. He didn't replay the conversation. There wasn't room left for that tonight.

Tonight, he was just a son. A son trying to understand a father who built fences instead of bridges.

Trying to care despite the bruises they both carried. Trying to stay strong when all he wanted was to be held. He stayed the night, never once falling asleep. Just watching. Just wondering. Just being there.

It had been a week since papa was admitted to the hospital.

November was almost ending now, quietly slipping into December through cold mornings and exhausted evenings that all began looking the same after a point.

Sometimes there was simply too much to do.

Too many reports to collect.

Too many calls to coordinate.

Too many deadlines overlapping each other until time itself started feeling distorted.

Sachin often felt as though he had been running endlessly for months now — from one responsibility to another, from one emotional collapse to the next — and somehow, despite

doing so much every single day, the clock moved unbearably slowly.

Just in the last two or three months, life had overturned itself repeatedly.

Ishan's blackout phase.

The discussions around selling the property.

Papa's illness and diagnosis of progressive fatty liver disease with early cirrhotic changes.

Diwali celebrations wrapped around hidden anxiety.

Back-and-forth hospital visits.

Reports.

Medicines.

And then suddenly, Raina again.

At times, Sachin genuinely couldn't understand whether God slowed time down to give people enough space to deal with responsibilities...

Or whether pain was meant to be absorbed fully, slowly, completely — without letting anyone escape its weight too quickly.

The next morning, there was another meeting scheduled with the doctor regarding papa's recovery.

Sachin stood near the consultation desk listening carefully while the doctor flipped through the latest reports.

For the first time in days, the conversation sounded lighter.

"The recovery is going well," the doctor said finally. "Vitals are stabilising. Liver markers have responded better than expected to the medications. The critical concern has reduced now."

Sachin felt something inside him loosen instantly.

"But," the doctor continued, adjusting his glasses, "we still won't discharge him immediately. We'll need another

three to four days of observation just to monitor consistency in recovery and ensure the medications are suiting him properly.”

Sachin nodded immediately.

That was fine.

More than fine.

The worry part was over.

For the first time in weeks, relief arrived without hesitation.

He informed maa first.

Then Zara.

Then Ishan.

But not papa.

Definitely not papa.

Because if there was even the slightest change in discharge dates later, papa would become deeply disheartened after mentally preparing himself to leave. Sachin knew him well enough by now. Hope, when delayed, affected older people differently.

So he decided to keep things exactly the way they were until discharge became certain.

Somewhere in between all this, his phone buzzed with a message from Sameer.

A random meme first.

Then a terrible joke.

Then casually, almost awkwardly, Sameer asked if there were any openings in Sachin's company or if he could provide a referral somewhere. Attached below the message sat a PDF of his resume.

Life never really paused for anyone.

Sachin downloaded the file and replied with a thumbs-up.

*Will keep you updated.*

A few minutes later, another notification appeared.

This time from his director.

*January is going to be extremely packed. Better finish all pending tasks now itself so we can focus on upcoming projects properly.*

Sachin stared at the message for a few seconds before replying with a brief affirmation.

Work.

Hospitals.

Family.

Memories.

Everything continued demanding attention simultaneously.

There were no more urgent messages left to reply to, but still, his thumb kept scrolling absentmindedly through old chats and contact lists until suddenly he stopped.

Raina.

Her number had appeared again.

After their last meeting, he had saved it once more.

And then deleted it again.

A ridiculous cycle.

As if deleting a mere contact could somehow erase years of memories attached to it.

As if love disappeared through settings and options.

There were no messages between them.

No calls.

Only the same old display picture visible beside her name — proof enough that his number still remained saved in her phone too.

And strangely, that tiny detail affected him more than it should have.

Days passed like this — through shared responsibilities, exchanged silences, changing hospital shifts, and support nobody openly announced but quietly offered anyway.

Zara checking in constantly despite college work.

Maa carrying food and prayers together.

And Ishan especially — showing up without being asked, handling practical things before anyone even realised they needed help.

Then came the evening before discharge.

Sachin sat inside the hospital room with his laptop plugged beside the bed, surviving on badly brewed vending machine coffee while completing poorly assigned office tasks that suddenly felt meaningless under fluorescent hospital lights.

Papa was asleep beside him, heavily sedated from the stronger dosage of medications started that afternoon.

The room remained dim except for the pale glow of the laptop screen reflecting across Sachin's tired face.

At some point, he lost track of time entirely.

Emails blurred.

Words stopped making sense.

And eventually, while still holding onto the laptop tightly as though responsibility itself would collapse if he let go, Sachin drifted into sleep.

His body slumped awkwardly to one side, head resting against the edge of the hospital bed.

Beside him, the thin white blanket over papa rose and fell slowly with each breath.

That soft movement became the only reassurance his exhausted mind needed.

The only lullaby capable of keeping fear away for a few hours.

Outside, it was still dark when he finally felt it—

A gentle, rhythmic movement on his head. Fingers combing through his thick, tangled hair. A warmth that no hospital blanket could offer. He stirred. Slightly. And there she was—his maa.

Her eyes were swollen with broken sleep. The pleats of her saree had loosened, her dupatta barely clinging to her shoulder as though it, too, had been awake all night. And yet her face carried that strange, unwavering calm only mothers seem capable of—like they borrow strength from somewhere no one else can see. She didn't say anything at first. Neither did he.

The hospital room hummed softly around them—the rhythmic beep of the monitor, the faint whir of the ceiling fan, footsteps passing distantly in the corridor. This was not a moment that needed conversation. Her hand lifted and brushed gently through Sachin's hair. Slower this time. Not soothing—memorizing. As if she were trying to smooth away the exhaustion that had settled into him over the past few days. As if she could press strength back into his bones with nothing but her palm.

“Go,” she said quietly. “Freshen up. Change your clothes. I'm here with your father.” Her voice was steady. Not a request. Not quite an order either. Something in between—soft but immovable. Sachin opened his mouth as if to object. The word sat on his tongue. Then it dissolved. He couldn't argue with that tone. A mother's voice, when it carries both fatigue and faith, leaves very little room for resistance.

He stood up slowly. His back protested. His knees felt older than they should have. It wasn't the chair. It was the waiting. The watching. The not knowing. His fingers remained on the bedrail a second longer than necessary. The metal was cool beneath his skin. His eyes traced his father's face—the stillness, the faint rise and fall of his chest, the tube taped carefully to his arm. He didn't linger with fear. He

lingered with attention. As though noticing small details might somehow anchor them in place. The monitor continued its steady rhythm. Nothing had changed. And yet everything felt fragile.

He finally turned away. The corridor outside stretched longer than usual, fluorescent lights flickering faintly at the far end. He paused once, hand hovering over the doorframe, listening. The beep was still there. Steady. Predictable. He exhaled. Because sometimes stepping out for five minutes feels like tempting something unseen. Like leaving the room might allow the universe to rearrange it.

The corridor smelled faintly of antiseptic and over-brewed tea. A nurse pushed a trolley past him, wheels squeaking softly. Somewhere down the hall, a child cried and was quickly hushed. Life moved on in small, ordinary hospital sounds.

Sachin walked toward the washroom at the far end. He splashed water on his face, watching it drip from his chin into the sink. His reflection stared back at him—eyes rimmed red, stubble darker than usual, shoulders slightly bent. For a moment, he just stood there, palms pressed against the edge of the basin. He told himself, he will fix everything and everything will be fine.

Back in the room, his mother adjusted the bedsheet around her husband's legs. The light had shifted, now resting gently across his face. She leaned closer.

"See?" she murmured, almost playfully. "He finally went to freshen up. Stubborn boy."

Her fingers brushed against her husband's forehead, smoothing an invisible crease. The monitor beside the bed continued its steady rhythm—beep... beep... beep... She watched his chest rise. Fall. Rise again. The rhythm seemed slightly slower now, but she told herself it was only because the room had grown quieter. She leaned back in the chair,

exhaustion pulling at her eyelids. Just for a second, she closed them. When she opened them again, something felt... different.

Just a subtle shift, like when a fan slows before you consciously notice the change in air.

The beeping had stretched out.

Beep..... beep.....

Her spine straightened.

She leaned forward quickly, her hand finding his wrist. The skin felt the same. Warm. Familiar. She looked at his chest again, waiting for the rise. It came. But faint. Too faint. “Doctor?” she called softly at first, as if afraid to disturb him. The monitor flickered. Beep.....

A nurse passing by slowed, glancing into the room. Then the sound changed—sharper, more insistent. A flat, unfamiliar tone began to thread through the air. Everything that followed happened too fast and too slow at the same time. Footsteps rushed in. Voices overlapped. The curtain was pulled aside abruptly. Someone gently guided her back from the bed. “Please wait outside, ma’am.”

Outside. The word echoed.

Sachin was halfway down the corridor, drying his face with a paper towel, when he heard it. Not the words—just the shift in sound. The hurried footsteps. The change in the air. He saw the cluster of white coats near his father’s room. His heart dropped before his mind could understand why.

He walked faster. Then faster.

His mother stood just outside the door now, her hands clasped tightly together, her lips moving silently in prayer. Her eyes met his for a fraction of a second. They held something he had never seen before.

Not panic. Not tears. Just disbelief.

The sound inside the room flattened into a single, unbroken note.

Sachin stopped walking.

For a second, he genuinely thought the machine was malfunctioning. That someone would press a button and the rhythm would return. That this was a technical error. A delay. A pause.

Doctors moved around the bed with urgency. Commands were spoken. A chest was pressed. A syringe appeared. Sachin couldn't feel his feet. He watched through the small gap between shoulders and white fabric. "Come on," someone muttered. Time lost shape. And then—

Stillness.

The kind that doesn't hum. The kind that absorbs every other sound in the room. A doctor turned slowly. The expressions had shifted from urgency to something quieter. He walked toward them, removing his gloves carefully, as though even that required gentleness.

"I'm very sorry..."

The rest blurred.

Sachin didn't remember stepping forward, but suddenly he was inside the room. The monitor was silent now. No rhythm. No flicker. His father's face looked exactly the same as it had five minutes ago. Exactly. As if nothing had happened. Sachin waited for his chest to rise. It didn't.

He stood there, staring, as though patience alone might reverse it. As though refusing to accept the silence would force the sound back into existence. His mother's hand found his arm. This time, it trembled. And Sachin understood- Some gambles are never meant to be played. And five minutes can change everything.

The night hadn't ended. It had just changed shape.

The room did not change. The light was the same. The curtain still swayed slightly from the rush of air when the doctors had walked out. The sheet lay neatly across his father's chest, as though he were only resting. But the air had shifted. It had thickened. Sachin stood there, silent.

No words. No scream. No dramatic collapse.

Just that slow, crashing realisation settling into his bones. That no one would ever pronounce his name the way he did — stretching the first syllable when he was annoyed, softening it when he was proud.

That no argument would ever again end with a reluctant, half-smiling, “Jaane de... baap hoon tera.” That no matter how much he tried now, there would never be another evening, another cup of tea, another awkward attempt to bridge that bitter distance that had grown quietly between them over the years.

He had always believed there would be time.

Time to say things properly. Time to apologise without ego. Time to hear the apology he never asked for but secretly wanted. Time had left first.

Behind him, his mother's breathing had grown uneven. A nurse guided her gently to a chair. Someone began filling out paperwork in hushed tones, as if lowering their voices could soften the finality of it.

Sachin stepped closer to the bed. Up close, his father's face looked unchanged. The faint line between his brows. The greying hair at his temples. The familiar curve of his jaw.

He waited.

For a twitch. For a breath. For anything that would undo the silence. Nothing moved.

Outside, the sky broke open. Thunder cracked, loud and violent, as if the world had chosen drama where he had not. Rain began to fall in sheets, striking the hospital windows with

sharp urgency. It sounded like glass scattering against concrete. Inside, everything was unbearably still.

A son stood beside a body that had once felt invincible. He didn't know whether to say goodbye. He didn't know which words belonged in a moment like this. "I'm sorry" hovered at the edge of his lips — for the impatience, for the distance, for the conversations postponed, for the pride inherited too perfectly. But the words felt small. Too small for a lifetime.

His fingers hovered over the edge of the bedsheet before finally resting there. Not gripping. Just touching. As if confirming that this was real. Because some things remain unsaid forever. And some fathers leave before you gather the courage to say them. The rain outside did not stop.

And Sachin, who had spent days trying to be strong for everyone else, finally felt something inside him give way — not loudly, not visibly. Just a quiet fracture. One that would echo for the rest of his life. Sachin stood still for a while—longer than he realized—beside his father's body. The numbness had not yet cracked into grief. There were no tears, no sobs clawing their way up his throat. Just a tightness. A pounding in his head. And then...

Function mode.

Because someone had to. Because if not him, then who? He stepped outside the room, checked his watch without really reading the time, rubbed his face hard with both palms, and began making a list in his head.

Before going straight to the doctor, Sachin stepped out into the corridor and called Ishan.

His fingers trembled so badly that he almost dropped the phone while dialling.

The call connected on the second ring.

“Ishan...” His voice came out dry, unrecognisable even to himself. “Bring Zara with you to the hospital.”

A pause.

And then, before courage disappeared completely, he forced the words out.

“Baba is no more.”

Silence crashed from the other side instantly.

Sachin shut his eyes tightly for one second before continuing mechanically, as though reading instructions instead of speaking about his father’s death.

“Don’t let Zara know on the way here. Maa needs someone. Please... look after her too.”

And before Ishan could respond, before sympathy could enter the conversation and break whatever fragile control Sachin was holding onto, he cut the call immediately.

The corridor suddenly felt too bright.

Too cold.

Too normal for something so irreversible to have just happened.

Nurses still walked past carrying files.

Machines still beeped from nearby rooms.

Somebody somewhere laughed softly.

The world had not paused.

And that felt almost offensive.

Sachin stood still for a few seconds, staring blankly at the white hospital floor beneath him. His hands had gone numb. His chest felt strangely hollow, as if grief had arrived not as pain first, but as absence.

Then slowly, almost like his body was functioning separately from his mind, he walked toward the doctor’s cabin.

The doctor looked up the moment Sachin entered.

No formalities.

No unnecessary expressions.

Just the exhausted silence of someone who had delivered this news too many times in life.

He already knew why Sachin had come.

“Please sit,” the doctor said softly.

Sachin remained standing.

He wasn’t sure his legs would support him properly if he sat down.

The doctor removed his glasses slowly and began explaining everything carefully.

Papa’s liver disease had already progressed more aggressively internally than the reports initially reflected. The fatty liver disease with early cirrhotic changes had weakened multiple metabolic functions over time. Though the medications had started stabilising visible vitals externally, internally the liver’s declining function had begun affecting other systems more rapidly than anticipated.

“There are cases,” the doctor explained gently, “where patients appear clinically stable for days... and then deteriorate very suddenly.”

The night before, papa’s vitals had looked relatively controlled.

Blood pressure acceptable.

Sugar levels manageable.

Oxygen stable.

No alarming visible distress.

Which was exactly why discharge discussions had even begun.

But sometime during the early hours, his condition had collapsed abruptly.

The doctor explained how advanced liver dysfunction sometimes triggers sudden systemic complications — internal

metabolic imbalance, cardiac stress, silent organ instability, electrolyte disturbances — things that don't always present obvious warning signs beforehand despite continuous monitoring.

“Sometimes,” the doctor said quietly, “the body stops compensating all at once.”

The monitors had shown changes only moments before the collapse.

The staff responded immediately.

Emergency measures were started.

But there had been almost no time to reverse it.

Sachin heard every word.

And yet none of them fully entered him.

His mind kept getting stuck at a single point:

*He was supposed to be discharged tomorrow.*

Tomorrow.

They had discussed going home.

Maa had packed extra clothes already.

Papa had complained about hospital food just last evening.

And now people were speaking about him in past tense.

Sachin's body felt disconnected from itself.

His shoulders had stiffened so hard they hurt.

His jaw remained locked tightly as though one loosened breath would shatter him completely. His eyes burned from sleeplessness and shock, yet tears still refused to come properly. Exhaustion had crossed into something heavier now — a numbness so deep it almost felt physical.

He pressed both hands against the edge of the doctor's table for support.

Because suddenly even standing upright felt difficult.

“What... happened in those few hours?” he asked finally, voice barely audible.

The question sounded less like anger and more like helplessness trying to find shape.

The doctor lowered his gaze briefly before answering.

“We monitored everything we could, Sachin. But sometimes these complications remain silent until the body can no longer sustain them.”

Silence filled the cabin afterward.

Not the peaceful kind.

The kind that leaves a ringing sound inside the ears.

Sachin nodded once mechanically though nothing inside him had accepted any of it yet.

A few hours ago, he had fallen asleep listening to his father breathe beside him.

Now he was being handed explanations for why that breathing had stopped forever.

Discharge formalities. Hospital clearance. Calling the ambulance. Arranging a freezer box. Calling the pandit. Informing the extended family. Coordinating with the house help back at home. Booking tickets. Talking to the cremation ground authorities. Calling the bank. Telling the village.

*Telling the village.* The phrase rang in his ears.

Because people there would still speak of his father as “*Sachin ke papa*”, because they needed to know too. Because death, in village, wasn’t just a family event. It was a *community echo*.

By the time Zara arrived at the hospital with Ishan, she already knew.

Nobody had said the words to her directly yet, but sometimes grief reaches before information does. Sometimes the body understands loss before the mind is ready to hear it.

That was what had happened with Zara.

The entire ride to the hospital, Ishan had avoided speaking too much. His silences had stretched unnaturally long. And somewhere between unanswered questions and forced normal conversations, Zara's heart had already begun preparing itself for something terrible.

By the time she stepped inside the hospital corridor and saw Sachin standing there motionless outside the room, her worst fear had already taken shape within her.

Her eyes filled instantly.

But she did not break down.

Not fully.

Not yet.

Because maa was there.

And somehow, almost instinctively, Zara swallowed her own grief the moment she saw her.

Sachin looked toward Zara silently.

She was trying to hold maa gently by the shoulders, whispering something soft that neither of them were really hearing.

And maa...

Maa sat completely still.

Her eyes remained open, fixed somewhere beyond the room, beyond the people moving around her, beyond the hospital itself. But her body did not react to anything anymore.

Not to voices.

Not to footsteps.

Not even to tears.

She looked less like a person in that moment and more like a sculpture carved entirely out of sorrow.

As though something vital inside her had quietly left along with papa's final breath.

No scream.

No dramatic collapse.

Just absence.

A wife of decades suddenly sitting beside a world that no longer contained her husband.

Her hands rested lifelessly in her lap while the edge of her saree slipped unnoticed from her shoulder. The red in her eyes had deepened, but tears no longer fell continuously now. It was as if grief had moved beyond crying and settled somewhere deeper — somewhere unreachable.

Sachin had never seen silence look this devastating before.

And standing there, watching his mother reduced to stillness while Zara held herself together only for maa's sake, Sachin felt another unbearable truth settle inside him quietly.

From this moment onward, nothing in their family would ever return to the version it once was.

Zara whispered, "Sachin, can you... handle the paperwork? I'll stay with her."

He just nodded. No words. The knot in his throat was tighter now. At the billing desk, he kept forgetting the documents he'd just kept on the table. Had to ask the nurse twice what the procedure was. The man behind the counter offered him a chair. He didn't take it.

"Do you want to do the final payment now, sir?"

Final. That word. It stung more than it should have.

That night, after all the arrangements, phone calls, lists, and checkboxes, Sachin sat alone for a few minutes on the hospital stairs. The streetlamp was flickering. The rain had slowed to a drizzle.

His back ached. His eyes burned. And his brain... wouldn't stop.

He wasn't thinking about how his father used to sit silently reading the newspaper. Or how he once stood outside his school during a fight. Or how he scolded him for not knowing about veto power.

No. Sachin was thinking about...

The house. The house that was still under discussion to be sold. The one piece of brick and mortar that felt like *his father's hands stretched across a roof*. The kind of home where his mother still wrapped pickles in muslin. His mind drifted, uninvited, to a wall back home. A pale, slightly chipped wall near the kitchen doorway — the one his father had claimed as their measuring post. Every year, Sachin and Zara would stand straight against it, heels pressed flat, chin lifted too high in excitement. His father would take a pencil, squint one eye shut for precision, and draw a small line above his head. "Don't move," he would warn, though he was the one smiling. The dates were scribbled beside each mark. Uneven handwriting. Growing numbers. One afternoon, years later, Sachin had stood there again, more out of habit than ceremony. He had leaned back casually, not expecting anything. His father measured, paused, and then let out a short breath that sounded suspiciously like disbelief. "You've crossed me," he had said, trying to keep his voice neutral. But Sachin had seen it. That flicker in his eyes. That quiet swelling of pride he tried to hide behind a mock frown. As if his son growing taller was somehow his own achievement. He remembered how his father had stood straighter that evening, chest slightly broader, as though the extra inch belonged to both of them.

Now, standing beside the hospital bed, Sachin felt that memory press against his ribs. He had crossed his father's height. But had he ever truly reached him? The question clawed at him.

Could he have saved this? If he had insisted harder? If he had gone home sooner? If he had pushed past the pride, the arguments, the uncomfortable silences? He stared at his father's still face, searching for answers that would never come. Height had once felt like proof of growing up. Of becoming equal. Of becoming strong.

But strength felt useless now. Because no matter how tall he stood, he had never learned how to hold time in place. And for the first time since childhood, Sachin felt small again — not in inches, but in helplessness. The marks on that wall would remain. But the hand that drew them was gone.

He mentally checked his account balance. Pending EMIs. Zara's course fee. Medical bills. Travel.

Funeral. So many things to *save*, and not enough of him to save them.

He thought to himself: "Was I a good son?", "Did I say enough?", "Did I make him proud, ever?"

"Did he know how hard I was trying to become *him*, in all the ways I couldn't say out loud?"

And then the worst question- "Was I *enough*?"

He remembered the last few months— his sleepless nights, his multitasking between hospitals and Zoom calls, his juggling of meetings and medicines, the unpaid leaves, the laughter he faked in front of Maa, the calm he wore for Zara.

And yet it felt like he had only *begun* proving himself—and time had run out. So much to prove. So little time. It's an ache only children with responsibilities understand— The pain of becoming an adult in front of a dying parent. Of wishing you had just *one more* year to fix the distance. One more fight. One more conversation. One more chance.

But now— No more questions would be answered. No more silences filled. Just tasks.

Endless, mechanical, sterile tasks. And a young man trying to save his father's legacy before the world quietly sweeps it into forgettable dust.

Maa had folded into her own grief. She wasn't aware of anything beyond the emptiness beside her. Her world had narrowed to the space her husband once occupied — the chair he sat in, the cup he used, the silence he left behind. She moved through the house slowly, mechanically, as though guided by memory rather than intention.

Zara and Ishan stayed close to her. One would sit beside her. The other would handle calls, relatives, arrangements. They were present in every practical way. But their eyes kept drifting to Sachin. He stood apart. Not physically distant — he was there, in every room, speaking to people, signing papers, answering questions — but there was something around him. A quiet boundary. A wall no one dared to cross.

They wanted to sit beside him. To say something. To make him sit down, to make him drink water; to tell him he didn't have to hold everything together alone. But no words came. Because he didn't look broken in the way people expect. He looked... steady. Too steady just like his father.

He moved with purpose. Arranging things. Guiding Maa gently. Coordinating with relatives. His voice was calm. Measured. Responsible. And somewhere, in that calmness, Zara and Ishan sensed something sacred. This wasn't just duty. This was his final act as a son.

It felt as though stepping in too much would mean taking something from him — the last chance to stand tall in front of the memory of his father. The last opportunity to prove, in actions rather than arguments, that he had grown into the man his father had hoped he would be. Even if his father was no longer there to witness it.

Or maybe he was. In some quiet, intangible way. Sachin carried every responsibility without asking for help. Not

because he didn't need it — but because this weight felt personal. Earned. Necessary. Zara noticed the way his jaw tightened when no one was looking. Ishan saw the way his hands trembled for a second before he clasped them behind his back.

But neither spoke. Sometimes love isn't loud. Sometimes it is restraint. And how curious it is — the way different people respond to the same stimuli. One collapses inward. One weeps openly. One becomes stone. Grief is the same storm. But it carves each heart differently. And Sachin, standing there — tall, composed, unreachable — was weathering it in silence. Sachin didn't have time to grieve, so much like his father.

His days in the village were packed—every minute an item on a checklist: Death certificate. Bank accounts. Farm lease paperwork. House registration. He moved from one room to another, opening old almirahs, unlocking forgotten drawers that smelled of mothballs and old newsprint. Everything needed attention. Nothing was where it should've been.

And amidst it all, he remained unnervingly composed. Not a single tear. Not when the pyre was lit.

Not when the house turned cold without his father's stern footsteps. Not even when he folded his father's kurta and placed it in a trunk with trembling hands.

Maa noticed it.

She watched silently as he worked like a machine with a mission. Mothers see through everything. She didn't say it out loud, but in her eyes, Sachin could read it: “You haven't cried.”, “You haven't paused.”, “Where is my little boy who once clung to my dupatta and wept over a sparrow who died of electrocution?”

But maybe that little boy was gone.

Maybe, in the burning of the pyre, a man had risen—gritty, burdened, and silently powerful. And maybe that's what losing a father does to a son.

Ishan had come down to the village without a word. That's what brothers do. No announcement. No dramatic entry. Just *showing up* when needed. He stood next to Sachin during the rituals, held his shoulder when the priest muttered final verses, did the running around with pandits and papers and relatives.

Zara was sent back to Bangalore. Sachin insisted. "Your attendance is already in question. Maa is with me. Go." He said it like a big brother, like a father, like a man who had started carrying too much for his age. Zara didn't argue. But her eyes were moist when the bus pulled away, Ishan also accompanied Zara.

Back in Bangalore, Ishan was catching up with pending mails, meetings, performance reports, and the loudness of a world that never stopped spinning—no matter who died. When suddenly—his phone buzzed.

Raina.

“*H*ow is Sachin? I mean... is he okay?” Ishan stared at the message. He hadn’t heard from her in weeks. Something in him twisted. He exhaled sharply and typed:

“Please ask him yourself. He’s not an alien. He has a phone.” There was a pause.

Then the reply came, softly yet defensively. “*I did. Two days ago. Still a single tick. That’s why I asked you.*” Ishan blinked. His jaw tightened. His fingers hovered before tapping again.

“He lost his father. He’s in the village. Buried in a pile of paperwork, property matters, legal documents, and trying to be strong for his family. Maybe that’s why he hasn’t *checked his phone.*

You tell—how are you? What brought this sudden *concern*? Had an urge of checking on your ghosts or what?”

There was silence. A few minutes passed. Then the three little dots appeared and disappeared again. No reply.

-----:~)-----

The village house was wrapped in dusk. A half-lit veranda, half-drunk tea, and a head bursting with undone tasks.

Sachin sat on the worn wooden bench, his eyes scanning a ledger that barely made sense anymore. His fingers had gone still, mind distracted. And then—his phone buzzed.

Raina calling.

His heart skipped. A flutter. His fingers trembled. A cold sweep ran down his spine. He stared at the screen longer than he should have. But he took the call.

“Hello...”

His voice, tired. Hollow. Like an echo inside a closed room. No preface, no silence from the other side—just Raina's hurried, trembling voice.

“Sachin... how are you holding up?”

“Just... okay,” he said blankly, looking at the shadow of his reflection in the glass window, barely recognizing himself. Then softly added, “You say?” But Raina didn't answer that. Instead, she broke. Her breath faltered, and the dam cracked. “I'm so sorry... I don't know how to say this... I had no idea. Not about uncle. Not about any of it. It's all my fault. Since when did I become so distant that I didn't even know you were mourning alone...?”

She sobbed—unfiltered, like a child. Not the Raina he once knew in sharp comebacks and clever retorts. This Raina was raw, exposed, stripped of her walls.

Sachin closed his eyes. He couldn't take her pain. He could take his grief, maybe even carry the weight of the world—but her sobs, her guilt... it was too much.

“Raina...” he said softly, “please, don't cry. It's okay.”

“No, it's *not* okay, Sachin,” she whispered between gasps. “You're always there for everyone. And I—I ran. I disappeared. I was supposed to be a friend, and I don't even deserve to ask how you are...” There was a beat of silence. His throat tightened. But his voice remained warm. So warm. So gentle.

“Take care of yourself, hmm? Please stop crying. I have to step out for some work. I'll talk to you later, okay?” No blame. No bitterness. Just that soft tether that never seemed to fade, no matter how far Raina ran.

Back in the flat, night had settled like a slow fog. Ishan was sipping black coffee in silence when his phone lit up.

Message from Raina: *“Had a talk with Sachin. Please let me know if I can be of any help. I’m here for you two. Couldn’t say it to Sachin... but telling you—count me in for anything.”*

Ishan stared at the text for a while, reading between lines. He knew her well—this was her way of finding a place back into what she left. He typed nothing elaborate. Just hit reply, and sent a thumbs up. No more. No less. A lot had changed. And not all wounds deserved stitches right away.

-----:~)-----

The cab rolled into the familiar lane just past midnight. Sachin stepped out, suitcase in one hand, a silence heavier than any luggage in the other. The flat stood still—its windows shut, one warm light blinking through the curtains. He could tell Ishan was still up. He unlocked the door softly. No greetings. Just the hollow rhythm of returning. He placed his bag gently against the wall and looked around. The air felt familiar, but it didn’t carry the same ease. The shoes near the door were aligned just how he had left them. The kitchen shelf was stacked with new packets—clearly, Ishan had been cooking. A plate sat in the sink, soaking.

It was home. But it wasn’t. Ishan looked up from the couch, where his laptop glowed and papers were strewn around. “You ate?” His voice was casual. Real. Not performative.

Sachin nodded, dropped his keys in the bowl, and sank beside him. Neither said anything for a minute. Then Ishan handed him a glass of water, not out of courtesy, but habit. That’s what brotherhood was—silent replenishments.

“You smell like smoke and rituals,” Ishan said without looking at him. “And grief,” he added after a pause, softer.

Sachin let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. They sat in silence, screens open, tabs switching from deadlines to distractions, but the grief between them had a tab of its own. Constant. Undeletable. Ishan took the first real deep breath since his return and finally asked— "How's maa? Zara?" "Managing," Sachin replied. "Maa has kept herself busy with temple visits and cleaning things that were already clean. You know... mothers." And Zara barely making up for her final semester but things can't be avoided. To which Ishan replied yes, neither life can be avoided after incidents.

A wry smile danced on Sachin's face. Sachin stood, walked into his room, placed his phone on the side table, and noticed—

One unread message from Raina.- *"Just wanted to check if you're okay. Not asking for a reply. Just wanted you to know—I'm thinking of you. That's all."*

He didn't reply. He read it twice. Then turned the screen down and lay back on his bed. The walls of his room stared at him. So much had changed in the past few weeks. And yet, nothing outside seemed to notice. Deadlines were still looming. Projects were still running. Colleagues were still tagging him in emails with "gentle reminders." Sachin pulled the blanket to his chest, trying to remember what it felt like before everything fell apart. Before grief moved in like a permanent roommate. Before his father became a memory that still smelled like Tiger Balm and cardamom tea.

He didn't cry. Even now, he just blinked. Grief wasn't loud for Sachin. It was dry throat. Quiet feet. Fogged eyes. A mind that kept scrolling but never stopped.

-----:)------

The bike moved slowly through the evening traffic, its engine humming low beneath them. Streetlights flickered on one by one, casting brief streaks of light across Sachin's face as

they passed. Shadows cut across his jawline and disappeared just as quickly. He was riding. But he wasn't fully there. His hands held the handlebars steady, reflex guiding every turn, every brake. But his mind was somewhere else — wandering between the rusted gates of the district office and the dusty shelves of home, where his father's old books still carried that faint, familiar smell of paper and time.

Behind him, Ishan sat quietly. No questions. No “How did it go?” No forced conversation to fill the air. That was the unspoken rule between them. Brotherhood did not demand commentary. It understood silence. They had ridden like this before — late-night chai runs, pointless detours just to clear their heads, shared frustration after bad days. Long stretches without speaking, broken only by the occasional tap on the shoulder or a brief, knowing laugh at a traffic jam.

But tonight was different. The silence was heavier. It clung to them like humidity before a storm. Every unspoken thought felt suspended in the air between them, thick and inescapable. The city moved around them — honking cars, impatient pedestrians, vendors shouting — yet on that bike, it felt strangely insulated. Sachin slowed at a red light. For a second, his grip tightened. The world ahead was green when he finally looked up. And they rode on.

When they reached the flat, Sachin didn't collapse. He didn't change. He didn't even drink water. He just opened his laptop, finished the day's pending mails, sorted a few documents on his drive, and then...

Paused.

His fingers froze mid-keystroke. The cursor blinked on the laptop screen, patient and indifferent. Slowly, his eyes lifted — not toward a blank wall, but toward the wooden shelf opposite his bed. Behind it stretched a wallpapered wall, patterned in a mosaic design. Not the overly decorative kind. Subtle. Layered. Something textured but restrained. Raina

had once stood in this very room, tilted her head, and said, “not at all pretty.”

The shelf held fragments of his life in quiet arrangement. A few books lined the top row — not decorative purchases, but worn copies with folded corners and notes in the margins. Books he had returned to during different seasons of his life. Beside them sat a small painting of an aeroplane — a gift from one of his junior. He had mentored that junior through a difficult internship phase, stayed late after office hours to help her prepare for interviews. The painting had come with a handwritten note: “*Because you make people believe they can take off.*”

(Sachin had laughed when he first received the painting, amused more than anything, and without much thought, he kept it. To him, it was harmless—a simple gesture from a junior, nothing more. But Raina hadn’t seen it that way.

It wasn’t that she minded Sachin helping someone. That part of him—his willingness, his warmth—she had always known, always admired. What unsettled her was how casually it all seemed to end up... how easily that small gesture found a place on his shelf, as if it belonged there. On the video call, when she noticed it sitting quietly among his books, something in her snapped. Her face flushed red with anger, her words sharp, almost trembling. She wanted to reach through the screen and throw it away herself. Sachin, on the other hand, only smiled—softly, almost dismissively—finding her reaction a little too childish to take seriously. And that smile... it only made things worse.

The more he smiled, the more it ignited her. What he saw as lightness, she felt as disregard. He tried to explain—calmly, gently—that it was just a painting. A harmless gift from a harmless junior. But Raina wasn’t arguing about the painting anymore. “You can help anyone,” she said, her voice fierce but breaking underneath, “that’s who you are... and I love that. But let them know you have a girlfriend too.” Sachin

laughed again, softer this time, and nodded. He promised he would.)

And strangely enough... the painting stayed. But Raina didn't. Or maybe she couldn't. Or maybe, somewhere deep down, she never truly wanted to.

A bunch of keys rested near the edge — house keys, bike keys, the small duplicate key to the village home Maa insisted he carry. Tangled but functional. And next to them, a half-open packet of biscuits. Practical. So, he wouldn't have to get up and walk to the kitchen when work stretched late into the night. Nothing on that shelf was arranged for aesthetics. It was arranged for survival. For continuity.

He stared at it as though it were a screen — not projecting perfection, but projecting absence. Every moment he never got to replay with his father flickered quietly in his mind. The conversations postponed. The disagreements left unresolved. The casual “baad mein baat karengi” that never found its later.

The mosaic behind the shelf caught the dim light from the bedside lamp. Its uneven patterns suddenly felt symbolic — pieces fitting together imperfectly, forming something whole only from a distance. His gaze lingered on the aeroplane painting. He had helped others take off. He had anchored Maa. He had supported Zara. He had steadied Ishan. He had waited for Raina. And yet, in that quiet room, surrounded by books and keys and unfinished snacks, he felt the weight of the things he could not fix.

His fingers hovered above the keyboard again. The cursor still blinked. Waiting. Just like he had once done. A while later, Ishan walked in with a plate of food. Sachin didn't blink. Didn't flinch. He didn't look at Ishan when he spoke.

They were sitting on the terrace now, the city stretched out below them — scattered lights, distant horns, a sky that looked indifferent to everything that had happened. The night

air was cooler, but it did nothing to quiet the storm inside him. After a long silence, Sachin said softly,

“I keep thinking... should I feel different?”

It wasn't a performance. It wasn't a breakdown. It was a man trying to understand his own heart.

“I stood there today,” he continued. “Signed papers. Spoke to relatives. Made decisions.

He let out a faint breath. “And I did. I knew what to do.”

That was the strange part. He had handled everything. Calmly. Clearly. Like someone trained for this moment. “But inside...” he paused, searching for the right words. “Inside, it feels like the ground shifted. Not loudly. Just enough.” He swallowed.

“As a son, you think you have time. Time to argue properly. Time to say thank you properly. Time to become someone he can look at and say, ‘haan, theek kiya.’”

His gaze stayed fixed ahead. “And suddenly, that audience is gone.” No more witness to his milestones. No more silent evaluator of his choices. No more one person whose approval felt heavier than the world's. “As a man, I'm supposed to stand straight,” he said quietly. “And I am. I will. Maa needs that. Everyone does.”

There was no resentment in his tone. Just acceptance. “But as a son...” His voice lowered. “As a son, I didn't get to finish.” The sentence lingered between them. He rubbed his palms together slowly.

“You know what's strange?” he added. “I don't feel broken. I feel... altered. Like something fundamental has shifted. The ceiling above me is gone. There's no one taller in the room anymore.”

That was the weight. Not weakness. Responsibility had always been there — but now it felt permanent. Unshared. “And as a man...” He glanced briefly at Ishan. “I have to be

steady. Because if I bend, everyone will see.” “I don’t cry because I’m helpless,” he said. “I cry because a chapter closed without asking me if I was ready.”

A pause.

“I stood in front of the world today like a man who has it together. But somewhere inside, there’s still a son who just wants to hear his father say his name once more.”

The wind moved softly around them. For a moment, neither spoke. And in that silence, Sachin wasn’t weak. He was simply a man learning how to carry a world that had quietly grown heavier overnight. And in that moment—Sachin’s shoulders fell back just a little, as if finally allowing themselves to rest... even if only for tonight.

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The knock wasn’t loud. It was almost hesitant, but had a peculiar rhythm to it—two light taps, a pause, and then one solid thump.

Sachin didn’t move. Ishan glanced up from the couch, brows furrowing. The knock came again. Same rhythm. Same pause. And before anyone reached the door, it opened halfway. “Bhaiyon ke darwazon pe knock sirf formality hoti hai. Entry direct hoti hai.”

Sameer.

There was no announcement, no message beforehand—just the sound of the gate, slightly louder than usual, followed by footsteps that once belonged here so naturally that no one had ever questioned them.

Oversized hoodie. Combed hair. Half-tied shoelaces. That familiar half-smirk — the one that never fully revealed what he was thinking. Sachin looked at him. And for a brief second, the stiffness in his shoulders dropped. Sameer stepped

in without hesitation, dropped his backpack near the sofa, and pulled Sachin into a tight hug.

And then Sameer walked in.

“Yaar, no one even picks up calls now?” he said, half-laughing, brushing off the quiet as if it were dust on his shoulder.

There was no hesitation in him. No pause. Just the same warmth that had always defined him.

“Tu toh bilkul chup ho gaya,” he added lightly. “I mean, I leave for a few days and you turn into a sad poet?”

It was meant to be a joke. It sounded like one too. And yet, Ishan’s expression didn’t change.

Sachin let out a faint breath that almost resembled a laugh. Almost.

“Bas... thoda...” he said, not finishing the sentence.

Sameer didn’t ask him to.

Instead, he looked around the room. His eyes paused briefly at the framed photograph placed near the corner—the one with the garland still fresh.

There was a moment. Short. Almost unnoticeable. “Hmm...” Sameer nodded, softer this time. “I heard and I am sorry” That was all. Just that.

And then, almost seamlessly—

“Waise, chai milegi ya mourning period mein bhi band hai?” he added, glancing toward the kitchen.

The line was light. Familiar. Exactly the kind of thing he would have said any other day.

And maybe that was why it stayed in the room a little longer than it should have.

Sachin turned slightly, as if pulled between two versions of reality—one that had existed before, and one that refused to leave now.

“I’ll make it,” he said.

“Arey, tu rehne de,” Sameer waved it off. “Ishan bana lega. Waise bhi, isko kaam ki aadat daalni chahiye.”

Ishan got up without replying. Walked toward the kitchen quietly.

Sameer dropped himself onto the sofa, stretching his arms like he owned the space again.

“Waise, I missed this place,” he said. “Itna silence... peaceful hai.”

Sachin didn’t respond. Because the silence Sameer was talking about and the silence Sachin was living in... were not the same thing. A few minutes later, as the faint clinking of utensils came from the kitchen, Sameer leaned forward slightly. “Tu theek hai na?” he asked. And for a moment—just a moment—it felt real. Sachin looked at him. Really looked this time. Same face. Same voice. Same ease.

“Hmm,” he nodded.

Sameer held his gaze for a second longer... and then smiled.

The next few days settled into something that looked, on the surface, like normalcy.

Sameer stayed. Not officially. Not with any clear intention. He just... didn’t leave.

He occupied spaces the way he always had—effortlessly, without asking. The sofa became his again. The late evenings found his voice filling the room again. And slowly, almost naturally, conversations began to stretch a little longer than they had in the past few weeks.

It should have felt comforting. And sometimes, it did. Sameer had a way of pulling Sachin out of silence—not by addressing it, but by stepping around it. He talked about small things. Old school stories. Random people they barely

remembered. Half-finished jokes that only the three of them could understand.

And Sachin listened. Sometimes even smiled.

One evening, they were sitting outside, the sky dimming into that quiet blue that makes everything feel paused. Ishan had been unusually silent that day. Sameer, of course, filled the gaps.

“Yaad hai,” he started, leaning back, “school mein Sachin ko kitna ‘Mahatma’ bolte the?” He chuckled. “Har kisi ko help karega, har kisi ko samjhayega... jaise duniya ka contract isi ne le rakha ho.”

It was a familiar memory. The kind they had laughed about a hundred times before. Sachin smiled faintly.

“Haan, aur tu sabka mazaak udaata tha,” he replied softly.

Sameer grinned. “Arey, mazaak nahi udaata tha... reality check deta tha.”

Sameer added, almost playfully—

“Waise, tu abhi bhi waisa hi hai na? Ya thoda upgrade hua hai?”

Sachin didn’t answer immediately. It was a simple question. But something about it lingered longer than it should have. “I don’t know,” he said after a moment.

Sameer tilted his head, watching him—not curiously, not critically... just attentively.

“Hmm,” he nodded. “Thoda change hona chahiye, Sachin. Sab log deserve nahi karte utni... sincerity.”

The word sat differently. *Sincerity*.

Sachin looked down at his hands.

He had heard something like this before. Not in the same tone. Not in the same setting. But somewhere... someone had once said almost the same thing.

Raina.

# 15

Raina was always after him about this. “You are too nice to people,” she would complain, usually while pacing around his room like an angry lawyer preparing a case. “And people take advantage of your goodness because you make it easy for them.”

At first, he used to laugh it off. But Raina never did.

“I hate it,” she would continue, voice sharpening with every sentence, “when people make you do things in the name of help, favour, friendship — and then disappear the second you need them. The world around you is full of people ready to claw at you first and rip you apart later while pretending they care.”

And then came the inevitable warning.

“I’m telling you, Sachin, either stay away from these people or discuss it with me first. I’ll be the evil force if you can’t be.” She would point a finger at him dramatically. “Because I can’t kill them... but I *will* kill you if you let them use you again.”

The memory pulled an involuntary smile onto his face.

God, she had always been impossibly childish around him.

Always talking. Always ranting. Yapping every thought that crossed her mind without restraint. Protective in ways that bordered on absurd. There had been times she had turned genuinely rude to people simply because Sachin had casually mentioned something they’d done to him once — a borrowed favour never returned, a manipulation disguised as

helplessness, a convenience wrapped in friendship. He would narrate it lightly, forgetting it within minutes.

Raina never forgot.

She interpreted every wound he ignored.

And now, with her absence sitting where her noise once used to be, Sachin's mind wandered somewhere stupid. Somewhere unfair.

If she believed so fiercely that people stayed only for what they could take from him... then what about her?

Was she with him for her own advantage too?

And if that was true... then who was supposed to punish *her* for taking undue advantage of Sachin?

The thought itself felt ridiculous the moment it formed.

Because if Raina had ever taken anything from him, it was never the kind that emptied him.

She had taken his stress and turned it into arguments.

His silence and filled it with noise.

His loneliness and occupied it so completely that he had stopped noticing it existed.)

"Sab log ek jaise nahi hote," Sachin replied quietly.

Sameer smiled again. "Exactly."

It was said lightly. Like everything else. But this time, Ishan didn't smile.

Then Sameer started another story—louder, funnier, easier to follow. And just like that, the moment dissolved. Later that night, as Sachin lay awake, staring at the ceiling, the conversation replayed—not fully, not clearly... just in pieces. Words without context. Feelings without shape. And somewhere in between—a voice. Soft. Familiar.

"You don't see it, Sachin..."

He turned slightly. Closed his eyes. It slipped away before he could hold it. By morning, it didn't feel important anymore. Just

another passing thought. Just another unfinished memory. And yet— something had begun. Quietly. Without announcement. Without reason. Just a slight shift... in how things felt.

The three of them were sitting together that afternoon. The curtains were half drawn, letting in a soft, dull light that made the room feel quieter than it actually was. Papers were spread across the table—documents, forms, things that had suddenly become necessary after Sachin's father.

Ishan was going through them carefully. "This one needs to be signed here," he said, pointing to a section.

Sachin leaned closer. "Here?"

"Yes. And this one later, after we—"

"Wait," Sameer cut in, casually reaching for the paper. "Why are you making it sound so complicated?"

His tone was easy. Helpful.

Ishan paused.

Sameer scanned the document quickly, then tapped on a different section.

"This should be done first," he said. "The rest can follow. It'll be simpler that way."

Ishan frowned slightly. "No, the order matters. If we don't follow—"

"Understanding matters more than order," Sameer interrupted again, still smiling. "And right now, Sachin doesn't need more confusion."

Sachin looked up briefly. Ishan leaned back slightly. Sameer continued explaining—clear, confident, effortless. And Sachin... listened because it did feel easier, because Sameer made it sound easier.

And maybe, right now, easy was what he needed. The papers were signed. The moment passed.

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Sachin's mornings were no longer mornings—they were continuations of nights that had never properly ended. The laptop remained open, numbers waiting, sheets unfinished, calls already lined up before the sun had fully risen. He moved through it all with the same intent he always had. Carefully. Sincerely. Trying not to let anything slip.

And yet— things were slipping. Deadlines stretched. Emails waited longer than they should. Small errors began to appear where none had before. Nothing alarming. But enough to be noticed.

“Did you sleep at all?” Ishan asked one morning, standing near the doorway.

Sachin gave a faint smile without looking up. “A little.”

Ishan didn't push further. He didn't need to.

Sameer, on the other hand, did. “You can't keep going like this,” he said one evening, watching Sachin work through another sheet.

“I'll manage,” Sachin replied.

Sameer leaned back slightly. “You always say that.”

Sachin didn't respond. Because he always did.

The days continued like that. Work. Calls. Numbers. And in between— voices that tried, in their own ways, to lighten the weight.

On some afternoons, Sameer would sit beside him.

“Take a break,” he would say. “Five minutes won't change anything.”

Sometimes Sachin listened. Most times, he didn't.

“Your role is intense,” Sameer said once, glancing at the screen. “A lot depends on you.”

Sachin nodded. “It's manageable.”

Sameer studied the sheet for a moment. “Still... not easy.”

Elsewhere— in a different rhythm altogether— Sameer had his own days. Not as visible. Not as consuming. But steady in their own way.

“I have an interview tomorrow,” he mentioned this one night.

Sachin looked up briefly. “That’s good.”

“Let’s see,” Sameer shrugged. “Just exploring options.”

Ishan smiled faintly. “You’ll do fine.”

Sameer grinned. “I usually do.”

Sometimes, Sameer asked questions. About work. About structure. About how things functioned. “Just curious,” he would say. Sachin answered. Because there was no reason not to.

At work, things became quieter. Not easier. Just quieter. Feedback came in softer tones. “We understand your situation.” “Just try to stay consistent.”

Sachin nodded. “I will.” And he meant it.

Or at least he was still trying to become the kind of person who could.

The evenings continued the same way they always had — three people in the apartment, conversations scattered between exhaustion and familiarity, the reels running only for background noise. Sameer usually occupied the larger side of the couch as though he had lived there forever, one leg folded beneath him, phone constantly in his hand. Ishan drifted between rooms, talking intermittently, opening the fridge every twenty minutes despite knowing there was nothing new inside.

“I have another round next week,” Sameer said one evening while scrolling through mails.

“That’s fast,” Ishan replied.

Sameer shrugged. “Depends on the role.”

Sachin looked up briefly before returning to his laptop. He didn't ask which role. Didn't ask where. He barely had the energy to remain inside his own thoughts lately.

Deadlines had begun swallowing entire days whole. Closures. Escalations.

Corrections for mistakes that weren't fully his but somehow still landed on his desk because Sachin had become that person at work — dependable enough to burden, sincere enough not to refuse. And sincerity, he was slowly learning, made people useful before it made them valued. Still, he kept going. Late nights at office. Back pain ignored. Meals skipped. Calls attended while half-asleep.

Even his manager had begun noticing the difference in him. Not laziness. Never that. Just exhaustion layered too deeply into someone who had once carried work effortlessly.

"There's something better suited for you," his manager had told him one evening after everyone else had left. "You should consider it."

Sachin had nodded quietly. And after that, something shifted. Applications were sent. Resumes updated.

Interviews attended silently during lunch breaks or from empty meeting rooms. No announcements. No discussions. Just careful movement toward something else. At home, meanwhile, nothing appeared different.

Sameer still came and went comfortably through the apartment, using Sachin's kitchen utensils, sleeping in the second room, borrowing chargers, eating food straight from containers while promising to replace them later and forgetting every single time. There was an ease to the way Sameer existed in Sachin's space — an entitlement built slowly through friendship until it no longer looked like entitlement at all.

And Sachin, being Sachin, never questioned it.

One evening, Sameer tossed his phone onto the sofa and said, almost casually, “I think this one might work out.”

“Which one?” Ishan asked.

“Just a role,” Sameer replied. “Let’s see.”

Sachin nodded absentmindedly. “Hope it works out.” And the conversation ended there.

Time moved. The financial year began closing. And quietly, without much emotional chaos, Sachin submitted his resignation. There was no dramatic relief attached to it. Just stillness. Like something inside him had already accepted the ending long ago.

He still didn’t tell Sameer and Ishan. Not yet. Maybe because he wanted to say it properly. Maybe because some part of him assumed friendship naturally survived these things. His last working day arrived quietly. The office looked exactly the same. People typing. Printers humming. Coffee machines making burnt-smelling coffee no one truly liked. His manager called him into the cabin for a final conversation.

“You’ve been one of the most sincere people here,” he said warmly. “That’s rare.”

Sachin smiled faintly. “Thank you.”

“And even though you’re leaving,” the manager continued, leaning back in his chair, “we’ve found someone to take over your responsibilities.”

Sachin nodded politely. “That’s good.”

“No one replaces loyalty,” the man laughed lightly. “But work moves on.”

Then casually, almost thoughtlessly, he added—

“There’s someone named Sameer who’s taken up your position.”

The world did not stop dramatically. No cinematic silence followed. But something inside Sachin went very still. Not because Sameer got the job. That alone would never have

hurt him. What hurt was the sudden rearrangement of every recent conversation in his head.

*I have another round next week. I think this one might work out. Depends on the role.*

Sameer had known.

Known while sitting across from him every evening. Known while living in his apartment. Known while watching Sachin drag himself through exhaustion and resignation and uncertainty. And yet he had said nothing. Not once. Not even casually. Not even, “*Hey, I applied to your company.*”

Because for Sameer, it probably wasn’t betrayal at all. That was the strangest part. Sameer was too thick-skinned to see emotional lines where others did. To him, opportunity was opportunity. Jobs were jobs. Vacancies existed to be filled. He probably believed friendship and practicality could exist separately without colliding into each other. And maybe for him, they could.

But Sachin was not built like that. For him, people and emotions intertwined too deeply. Spaces mattered. Timing mattered. Disclosure mattered. It wasn’t the replacement that cut through him. It was the silence surrounding it.

The realization that while Sachin had always moved through friendship with transparency — discussing problems, asking opinions, making space for others inside his life — Sameer had quietly walked around him instead.

Not out of cruelty. Not even malice. Just convenience. And somehow that made it worse. Because intentional betrayal at least acknowledges your importance. This felt smaller. Casual. Like Sachin’s feelings had simply never entered the equation at all.

“I wanted you both to meet,” the manager continued casually while arranging a few papers on his desk. “Thought you could guide him initially. But he couldn’t make it today.”

Sachin stood still.

“I’ve shared your contact with him,” the manager added with a polite smile. “Hope that’s alright.”

“Yes,” he said softly. “That’s alright.”

The manager smiled, unaware of the silence settling behind Sachin’s ribs.

The conversation ended soon after. A handshake. A few final formalities. Then Sachin walked out of the cabin for the last time. The office floor looked exactly the same as it always had. People talking near printers. Someone laughing loudly near the pantry. Keyboard clicks blending into the low hum of air conditioning.

It felt strange how betrayal could arrive in the middle of ordinary things. Not loudly. Not violently. Just quietly enough for only one person to hear it.

Outside the building, the evening sun had already begun fading into that dull orange city haze. Sachin stood near the gate for a moment longer than necessary, staring absentmindedly at the traffic moving ahead.

His phone buzzed.

Sameer.

*Bro, coming late today. Don’t wait for dinner.*

Sachin looked at the message for a few seconds. Then locked the screen. No anger came immediately. That was the problem with him. Pain reached him slowly. First came understanding. Then silence. Then the hurt. Because even now, some foolish part of him was still trying to justify it.

*Maybe Sameer wanted certainty first.*

*Maybe he didn’t know how to tell him.*

*Maybe he thought it wasn’t a big deal.*

And perhaps for Sameer, it truly wasn’t.

Sameer had always moved through life differently — practical where Sachin was emotional, detached where Sachin carried weight. He never lingered over moral details the way Sachin did. If an opportunity existed, he took it. If something benefited him, he moved toward it. Simple. No guilt. No overthinking. No emotional aftermath.

Meanwhile Sachin had spent years making space for people inside his life as though relationships themselves were responsibilities. And maybe that was why betrayals exhausted him so deeply. Not because people hurt him intentionally. But because they rarely even noticed they had. By the time he reached the apartment that evening, the house was empty.

Sameer's shoes lay near the entrance. Ishan's headphones were abandoned on the sofa. A half-finished can of coke still sat on the dining table from the morning. Everything looked painfully familiar. Sachin stood in the middle of the living room for a long moment before quietly entering his room and shutting the door behind him.

No confrontation happened that night. No accusations. No emotional explosion. Just silence settling into places where comfort once existed. And life, indifferent as ever, continued moving.

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Far away from all this heaviness, Zara had thrown herself entirely into college recruitment season. Her world had become aptitude tests, case studies, mock interviews, formal shirts hanging carefully behind doors, and endless preparation tabs open across her laptop screen.

She approached it with fierce determination.

Sometimes she practiced answers standing before the mirror, speaking with exaggerated confidence until she ended up laughing at herself. Other times she spread notes across the

table, hair tied messily, muttering frameworks under her breath while drinking cold coffee she forgot to finish.

And almost every few nights, she called Sachin.

“Panel round clear ho gaya,” she said once, trying very hard to sound composed and failing miserably because excitement leaked through every word.

Sachin smiled despite himself.

“Good,” he replied softly, pride slipping naturally into his voice. “Bas confidence se bolna.”

“Tumhara confidence toh Excel sheet mein hi rehta hai,” she teased immediately.

He laughed quietly. A real laugh this time. Small. But real. And somehow, in that brief moment, things felt normal again. Comforting.

Because while some people entered your life and quietly taught you how replaceable you were, others unknowingly reminded you that you still mattered beyond your usefulness. And maybe that was enough for now. Not healing. Not closure. Just enough warmth to make the loneliness less absolute.

Maa, back in the village house, was learning her own version of steadiness. The first few weeks had been heavy with visitors, rituals, advice. But now the house had thinned out. Silence had returned to its corners.

Sachin began visiting more frequently. Sometimes just for a day. Sometimes for two.

He'd check the locks, review documents, sit beside Maa while she sorted old utensils that no longer felt necessary. She didn't cry the way she had earlier. Grief had changed shape. Now it showed up in small things — like her keeping his father's slippers in the same place near the door. Or saving the last mango from the tree because “he liked this one.”

Sachin didn't force change. He let her adjust at her pace. He fixed a loose window hinge. Rearranged a cupboard. Took her to the bank. Sat quietly in the courtyard in the evenings while she narrated stories from decades ago, stories he had heard before but listened to as if they were new. He wasn't trying to replace anything. He was just ensuring the house didn't feel abandoned.

Sachin tried many times to convince Maa to come with him to Bangalore. He reminded her that Zara would be there too, that she would not be alone, that things would become easier if they all stayed together.

But every single time he brought up the topic, Maa either quietly avoided the conversation or firmly refused the offer altogether.

Leaving everything behind so suddenly had never made sense to her.

And somewhere, Sachin understood that completely. He knew how deeply attached she was to this life — these walls that had witnessed decades of laughter and grief, the old trees in the courtyard she watered every morning, the mandir where her prayers had slowly become part of the house itself, the kitchen that still carried the warmth of her hands, even Rustle, her old pet dog who followed her like a shadow.

These were not merely things to her. They were pieces of a life she had nurtured patiently for years.

To leave all of it behind and move to another city as though none of it mattered would not just uproot her routine — it would feel like tearing away parts of her soul.

Back in the city, new office and the pressure didn't disappear — but it became manageable. Sachin began responding differently. Shorter emails. Clearer boundaries.

One evening, when a senior colleague tried to offload extra work at the last minute, Sachin replied calmly—

“I’ll take this up tomorrow. Not feasible tonight.” No over-explanation. No apology.

Ishan noticed.

“You’re learning,” he said lightly.

Sachin smiled. “Bass prioritizing.” It wasn’t rebellion. It was balance.

Some nights, when the flat was still and the fan spun lazily above, a thought would drift in.

Raina.

A memory of how she used to stand by the window during rains. The way she laughed without finishing her sentences. A half-written message he never sent. The thought would linger for a few seconds. Then he would close the tab in his mind. Not out of bitterness. Just because this wasn’t the season for revisiting unfinished chapters. There were enough pages open already.

The rhythm of life returned in small, imperfect waves. Zara sat for her final round interview wearing a navy blazer, calling Sachin before walking into the campus hall. Maa sent him a photo of freshly planted marigolds in the courtyard. Ishan continued his in-and-out lifestyle — gym mornings, client calls, late-night reels — but with a sharper eye now. Less reactive. More aware.

And Sachin? He remained steady. Not naive. Not hardened either. Just... aware that the world was layered.

That intentions and outcomes don’t always align. That kindness doesn’t mean blindness. Somewhere deep inside, the incident with Sameer had shifted something — not into suspicion, but into discernment. He didn’t speak about it. He didn’t analyze it. He simply absorbed the lesson quietly. And life moved.

Raina had been careful. For weeks, she had checked in only through Ishan.

Short messages.

Neutral tones.

“Sab theek?”

“How’s aunty now?”

“Work manageable?”

Never directly to Sachin. Never enough to open a door. Just enough to make sure the house was still standing. Ishan understood the pattern. She was hovering at the edge — close enough to know, far enough to stay safe.

But that night, her message was different.

*I miss us.*

No context. No emoji. No shield. Ishan stared at the screen for a long second.

He didn’t reply. He called. He half-expected it to ring out. To be ignored. To be “accidentally” missed.

But it connected on the third ring.

“Hello?” her voice came through — soft, cautious. He smiled unconsciously. “Hi.”

A small pause.

“Hi.”

Normal greetings followed. Surface-level updates. How work was. How traffic still made no sense. But beneath the lightness, something trembled. Raina hadn’t planned to pick up. She had texted because it felt safer. Vulnerability feels braver in written words — you can delete before sending. You can edit. But when the phone rang, logic lost.

And she answered.

Ishan didn’t interrogate the message. He didn’t ask why she missed “us.”

He just said, gently,

“I’m here. Anytime you feel things are not in your control... I’m here. And you know Sachin is too. He always has been. Probably more than me.”

Silence. Then a small inhale on the other end.

“I know,” she whispered.

Her voice was steady — almost too steady. Then she apologized. For distance. For misunderstandings. For the silence that had stretched too long.

“I should have handled things better,” she said, and though she tried to keep it composed, something in her voice cracked softly — like fine glass under pressure. The tears came quietly. Not dramatic sobs. Just a gentle overflow — like golden rills slipping from eyes that had held too much for too long. She tried to clear her throat casually, hoping he wouldn’t notice.

Ishan noticed.

Of course he did. But he didn’t acknowledge it.

Because naming tears sometimes makes them retreat.

And their bond was built on that unspoken understanding — knowing when to hold space without shining a spotlight on the wound. They spoke for a long time. Longer than either expected. About old school memories. About how chaotic their flat used to be during festivals. About how Sachin still overthinks emails. About how life feels faster now, but less certain. She asked about Ishan’s family. About Amit. About Maa.

“How is aunty adjusting?” she asked softly.

“Better,” he replied. “Sachin goes often. He doesn’t let her feel alone.”

A pause.

“And Sachin?” she asked carefully.

“He’s... steady,” Ishan said. “Handling. Like always.”

There was a faint shift in her breathing at that. Then suddenly, her tone lightened.

“You remember how desperate I was to fix you with Zara?” she laughed, the sound breaking through the heaviness.

Ishan groaned dramatically. “Don’t remind me.”

“For no reason at all!” she burst into fuller laughter now. “I had convinced myself it was destiny.”

“Ab is dosti ko rishtedaari mein badalne ka time aa gaya hai,” Ishan mimicked her old dramatic tone.

They both laughed. The kind of laughter that carries history inside it.

“You were so serious about it,” he teased. “As if it was some social project.”

“It was!” she protested playfully. “I thought I was solving the universe.”

“And instead, you complicated it.”

“Excuse me.”

More laughter. Then softer conversations followed.

About how growing up means watching friendships stretch and survive different seasons. About how not every silence is betrayal. About how some bonds don’t need daily conversations to remain intact.

By the time the call neared its end, the air between them felt lighter. Not resolved. But warmer.

“Thank you,” she said quietly before hanging up.

“For what?”

“For not asking too much.”

He smiled.

“Always.”

When the call ended, Ishan sat still for a moment.

He didn’t immediately tell Sachin. Some conversations need to settle before being shared. But in that small shift — in

that fragile, vulnerable “I miss us” — something had reopened. Just a quiet thread, rewoven.

And somewhere in another room, Sachin sat at his desk, unaware that the past had just knocked — softly — on a door that was never fully closed.

Spring arrived quietly that year. Not in loud declarations, but in small confirmations that life was moving.

Zara got selected through campus recruitment — a young, energetic start-up in another city had picked her for content writing. She called the moment the result came out, voice trembling with excitement.

“I got it.”

Sachin didn’t even let her finish the sentence before smiling. “I knew you would.”

She spoke of rented apartments, metro maps, editorial meetings, late-night brainstorming sessions. Of building something from scratch. Of finally standing on her own feet. There was pride in her voice. And freedom.

Ishan, too, had begun preparing for a job switch. Interviews lined up. LinkedIn notifications buzzing. He moved through the flat with a new kind of focus — updating résumés, taking mock calls, mapping possibilities.

Sachin’s long-overdue promotion finally came through. It wasn’t dramatic. Just a mail from HR. But it felt earned.

The property matters, though slow and layered, were settling into structure. Boundaries clarified. Documents filed properly. Maa adjusting more steadily with each passing week — planting new flowers in the courtyard, learning how to sit in silence without drowning in it.

Everything seemed aligned. Like winter had finally stepped aside. Like the air was lighter. Like the future was waiting with open hands. Only one thread remained unfinished.

Raina.

Not actively present. Not entirely gone. Just... suspended.

There had been months of distance. Careful messages. Occasional check-ins through Ishan. Long pauses filled with unsaid things. Sachin had given her time. Space. Patience.

He had sent paragraphs once — honest ones. Acknowledging her fears. Validating her doubts. Owning his part in misunderstandings. Offering reassurance without pressure. He had never cornered her. Never demanded. He waited. Not passively. But respectfully.

And then, one fine afternoon, when the sun was warm but not harsh, when work had just ended on a good note, when everything else seemed almost aligned —

His phone buzzed. A message from her. He opened it.

*Let's end it officially.*

That was all. No explanation. No context. No hesitation. Just that. It didn't explode inside him. It didn't shatter him. It settled. Heavy. Like something long anticipated but still unwanted.

He stared at the screen for a long time.

He had imagined conversations — difficult ones, maybe emotional ones. He had imagined clarity. A conclusion that made sense. This was not that. This was abrupt.

Clinical.

As if all the months of space had condensed into a single, decisive sentence. He didn't respond immediately. He placed the phone face down. Sat back. Closed his eyes.

There had been a time when he would have replied with another paragraph — patient, composed, trying to understand her angle, offering yet another bridge. But this time, he felt tired. Just tired. Bone-deep.

Still, against his own nature of letting things dissolve quietly, he typed back.

*Is this what you truly want?* No accusation. Just clarity.

Her reply came minutes later.

*Yes. It's better this way.*

Better. For whom? For what?

He tried once more.

*Can we at least talk?*

Typing....Stopped....Typing again....Then—

*There's nothing more to say.*

He read that twice.

There's nothing more to say.

After all the space given. All the waiting. All the unspoken hope that one day she would return with certainty instead of fear. Nothing more to say. He felt something inside him go still. Not rage. Not heartbreak in cinematic form. Just stillness. He didn't beg. He didn't argue.

He didn't send a long message explaining love like he had once done.

He simply typed—

*Okay.*

And put the phone away. Spring outside continued.

### ***Worth the Inconvenience***

*I once wished to dissolve in you,  
To melt in love, sincere and true.  
I reached, I tried, I stayed, I gave,  
Then found myself a love-bound slave.*

*I begged for warmth, for just a sign,  
While you walked paths, apart from mine.  
You heard my storm just yesterday,  
Your silence somehow swept pain away.*

*But know—I've taken steps behind,  
Retreating thoughts, rewinding mind.  
Afraid to walk beside you still,  
When love feels lost against your will.*

*You spoke of better days to be,  
Yet kept your truest self from me.  
All I want is words—not grand,  
Just talk enough to understand.*

*Sometimes done is better than perfect,  
A whisper means more than silence that's flawless.  
And if I seem like too much to bear,  
Remember—I was always there.*

*For when I pour my love in full,  
You'll feel it rising, deep and whole.  
To be loved is worth the inconvenience,  
Not just ease, but shared resilience.*

*So here I stand, with hope not gone,  
For tiny steps to build upon.  
Let's start afresh, let laughter lead,  
And plant a love we truly need.*

Zara was packing for a new city.

Ishan was scheduling final interviews.

Maa was planning to repaint one wall in the courtyard.

Life was beginning.

And in the middle of that beginning, one chapter closed without ceremony.

No closure. No explanation. Just a quiet ending.

Sachin sat for a while after that. Hands resting on his knees. Breathing steady. He had waited with dignity. He would leave with it too.

# 17

*The door creaked open slightly—just enough for Sachin to lean in, shoulder tilted against the frame. There was that crooked smile again. Wry. Worn-out. The kind of smile people wear when they’ve managed to mask a heartbreak just enough to make it through the day.*

*“By the way,” Sachin said, voice casual, too casual, “I deleted her number today.”*

*Ishan looked up, eyebrows raised slightly. But he didn’t say anything.*

*Sachin exhaled, the breath catching somewhere between defiance and defeat.*

*“Photos are tougher,” he added, looking at a spot above Ishan’s head. “Maybe someday I’ll have the strength to delete those too.”*

*A pause. A glance. A small nod from Ishan. Just that. No words. But perhaps Sachin knew that silence too had its own grammar between old friends cum flatmates.*

*Sachin turned, half-smiling again, and made to leave—shoulders squared, feet dragging a little more than they should have. But then he stopped. Just past the door, he turned back with a little U-turn, leaned on the doorframe again—same position, same crooked smile, but this time, the eyes were different. Wilder. Wetter.*

*“But bro...” he said, a laugh threatening to break the grief in his throat, “deleting her number doesn’t even make sense, honestly.” He tilted his head, grinning faintly.*

*“It’s 618421...”*

*“...8888,” Ishan finished without missing a beat.*

*Finally, ishan asked, gently—*

“Will you be fine letting her go? Like this? With no closure?”

Sachin didn’t answer immediately.

He leaned back against the sofa, eyes fixed somewhere beyond the ceiling. A faint smile appeared — not the easy one, not the playful one.

A smaller one. Tired. He exhaled slowly. As if that breath carried more than air. As if it was trying to empty something that had been sitting inside him for months. His hand moved instinctively to his curls. He ruffled them absently, messing them up the way she used to tease him for — the way she liked them slightly unruly.

For a brief second, something flickered across his face.

Then he spoke.

“A boy who has swallowed the loss of his father...” he said quietly, voice steady but heavier than usual, “...can let her go too.”

A pause.

“She’s just a girl.”

Ishan watched him closely. There was no bitterness in his tone. No attempt to belittle what they had. Just fatigue.

Sachin stood after a while and walked toward the balcony. The air was cooler now. He looked out at the city lights — steady, indifferent. He didn’t text her again. He didn’t reopen the chat. He just stood there, letting the night settle around him. Some losses break you. Some simply teach you the weight of letting go. And Sachin, who had already learned how to carry grief without collapsing, chose once again to stand straight. Even if standing straight felt heavier than falling apart.

## *Raina's Journal*

I have changed.

I no longer see myself as a woman of courage, confidence, or maturity — at least not in the way I once did. Those words feel distant now, like labels that belonged to someone else, someone I used to be but cannot quite recognize anymore.

Most days, I dislike the version of myself I've become. Sometimes the feeling is sharper — closer to loathing. And because of that, I stopped talking to people. Not all at once, not dramatically, but slowly. Especially the people closest to me. My inner circle. Because talking to them means they might see how fragile I feel. And if they see it, it becomes real. And if it becomes real, I know I will hate myself even more.

This didn't happen overnight.

It crept in quietly, even when I was still with Sachin.

Things became quite difficult for me to perceive in an okay way, forget about accepting them gracefully. I think that was the point from where sadness slowly seeped into me — quietly, almost invisibly at first — and then decided to stay. What once felt temporary slowly began settling into the corners of my mind, until one day I realized it was no longer visiting me; it was living inside me.

Sometimes, I think of my sadness as a seed I had sown long ago without realizing it. Maybe with every unspoken hurt, every swallowed question, every moment I convinced myself that I was “overreacting,” I watered it a little more. And now it has grown into a full-fledged tree with roots so deep that I no longer know where they end and where I begin.

But it is not the kind of tree that blooms. There are no flowers on it. No leaves either. Only branches. Pale, lifeless branches stretching endlessly into emptiness, thin and brittle like the skeletal hands of a ninety-year-old man — exhausted

by time, hollowed by survival, still standing somehow, but devoid of spring, warmth, or shelter.

And sometimes I wonder if this is what grief truly does to a person. It does not always destroy them all at once. Sometimes it simply keeps growing inside them until they no longer remember what it felt like to bloom.

*What if cobwebs were once fairy lights—  
only forgotten by time?*

*What if, despite everything,  
I still choose the cobwebs  
now and forever?*

*Because perhaps  
I find more beauty  
in their shimmering silver intricacy  
than in the fading, borrowed glow  
of decorative lights.*

*At least cobwebs  
are home to someone.  
Fairy lights are only meant  
to impress for a while.*

*And in the end,  
everything longs to return home.*

*So let others choose illumination—  
I will choose the cobwebs,  
quietly, deliberately,  
forever.*

I still remember the trip we took to Lonavala. You were so full of energy after the journey, almost childlike in your excitement. You wanted to explore immediately, to go out, to

see everything at once. And I — exhausted from the travel, drained in ways I could not even explain properly — only wanted to sleep for a while before beginning the trip. Such a small difference. Such a small moment.

Yet somehow, it became the reason the entire trip collapsed between us.

You got angry at me for not matching your excitement. You walked ahead during the trek, far enough to make me feel your distance intentionally. You barely spoke to me. The silence between us became heavier than the hills around us. And at one point, you pushed me — not enough to injure my body, perhaps, but enough to bruise something much deeper inside me. I remember feeling shattered that day. Not because couples don't fight. Not because disagreements are unusual. But because while I was desperately trying to save the trip, trying to calm you down, trying to make things okay before the bitterness consumed everything, you had already withdrawn into yourself completely. I kept asking you to talk to me, to stop being upset, to not let the entire trip turn into a memory we would regret.

But you chose your silence over me. And then, strangely, by the time we were leaving, you were suddenly okay again. As though nothing had happened. You came close to me, soft again, affectionate again, kissing my face repeatedly like people do after ordinary little fights. But I remember feeling startled instead of comforted. Because while you had moved past the hurt, I was still standing inside it. You expected me to return to normal simply because you had. As though your affection at the end could erase the loneliness I had carried throughout the trip.

And when I hesitated, when my sadness did not disappear immediately, you became frustrated with me instead. You accused me of making a big issue out of everything. You said that now that you were trying to fix

things, I was the one refusing peace. But was I really making a big deal out of it? Or was I simply unable to switch my pain off as quickly as you switched your anger off? That is what always remained unresolved between us.

You experienced emotions like passing weather — intense perhaps, but temporary. You became angry, distant, silent, and then suddenly affectionate again, expecting love to resume from the exact same place where it had paused. But for me, emotions stayed and lingered in the body. In the memory. In the voice.

I never truly confronted you about how deeply that trip affected me. I swallowed the bitterness quietly, convinced once again that perhaps I was just “too emotional.” And eventually, like everything else between us, the incident got buried beneath routine conversations and ordinary days.

You moved on believing I had ruined the trip. And I moved on carrying the grief of how alone I had felt during it.

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I still remember that evening we spent with Koyal and Gokesh, back when they were seeing each other. We had gone to a beautiful café — one of those places with warm yellow lights, overpriced coffee, soft music, and people pretending life was lighter than it actually was.

Everything looked beautiful from the outside. But some evenings rot quietly from within.

It started casually enough. Koyal made a comment about the way I had applied my eyeliner that day. She laughed loudly after saying it, and Gokesh joined in almost instantly. Then came another remark about the shoes I was wearing. Then stories from the past. Then little imitations of the way I spoke or reacted to things.

At first, I tried laughing along. Because that is what people expect you to do when humiliation is disguised as humour. But somewhere during that drive in Gokesh's car, I realized I was no longer part of a conversation. I had become the subject of it. Every joke somehow circled back to me. Every punchline landed on me. Koyal and Gokesh kept narrating stories and laughing uncontrollably while I sat there feeling smaller and smaller with every passing minute.

And you stayed quiet.

Maybe you genuinely did not understand what was happening. Maybe you thought it was harmless banter. Or maybe it simply felt easier to laugh along than interrupt the atmosphere.

But silence has its own language too.

There was a moment when I stepped out of the car because I genuinely thought I would break down in front of everyone if I stayed there any longer. My eyes were burning, filled to the brim with tears I was trying desperately to hold back. I remember standing outside for a few seconds, breathing heavily, wanting to disappear from that place entirely. Not just from them. From you too.

Because I could not understand how the person who loved me was able to sit through my humiliation so calmly. And perhaps the cruellest part was that I knew exactly how all of this would look from the outside. People would say I was being too sensitive. That I could not take a joke. That friends tease each other all the time.

But I am not incapable of understanding humour. I know the difference between joking and being cornered. I know the difference between playful teasing and collective ridicule. And that evening, beneath every laugh, there was an undertone I could feel in my bones.

After coffee, when I quietly mentioned wanting to leave, Gokesh suggested that we sit outside in the café garden for a

little longer and continue talking. Continue laughing. Continue, perhaps, tearing pieces off me in the name of fun. And then Koyal made the remark that stayed with me long after the evening ended. She laughed about the kind of novels I read and the kind of things I write. She said my writing was so gloomy and depressing that nobody would ever want to read it in the future. Then she laughed loudly and high-fived Gokesh.

Gokesh laughed too. And then — you laughed.

I think something inside me collapsed at that exact moment. Not because a girl mocked my writing. Not because someone criticized my taste in literature. People are allowed to dislike what I love.

But my writing was never entertainment for me. It was the only place where I had ever been fully honest with myself. The novels I read, the stories I write — they were deeply personal, private parts of me. I never even wanted the world to validate them. I wrote because it kept me alive in ways people would never understand.

And you knew that.

You had always told me you admired my writing. You used to call yourself a fan of the worlds I created. So, when you laughed with them, even casually, it did not feel like a joke. It felt like abandonment.

I excused myself immediately after that and locked myself inside the café washroom. I remember staring at myself in the mirror for a few seconds before breaking down completely. I cried quietly, desperately trying not to make noise because I did not want strangers outside to hear me falling apart over what everyone else would probably call “just jokes.”

Later, the three of you dropped me at the metro station. The ride was quiet. You barely said anything. And I sat there furious.

Ironically, I think I was more hurt by you than by Koyal or Gokesh. Their behaviour upset me, yes, but somewhere I had expected better from you. You were the person I thought would become my moral compass in rooms where I felt alone. I thought at some point you would interrupt, redirect the conversation, defend me, or at the very least notice that I had emotionally withdrawn.

But you never did.

And maybe what hurt most was that you never even realized the damage that evening had done to me. I wanted to explain it to you later. I wanted to dissect every sentence, every laugh, every silence, and tell you exactly why it had hurt so deeply. But I stopped myself because Koyal and Gokesh were your friends too, and I did not want to become the reason friendships grew awkward or fractured.

So instead, I swallowed it. Like I swallowed everything else. And then, slowly, I began doubting myself instead. Maybe my perspective was too negative. Maybe I overanalysed things. Maybe I imagined malice where none existed. But the truth is, wounds do not form out of nowhere. Things like these did not break me overnight.

They seeped into me gradually — one silence, one dismissal, one laugh at the wrong moment at a time.

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I often wondered when exactly love had started turning into loneliness. Maybe it had begun with something as harmless as a canvas painting.

One of your juniors had gifted you a hand-painted canvas — an aeroplane breaking through clouds. At the bottom, she had written that you were the kind of person who gave wings to the people around you. Everyone around us found it thoughtful, sweet, innocent even. I smiled too, at least

outwardly. But somewhere beneath that smile, something ugly and painfully human had taken birth inside me.

Jealousy.

Not because of the painting alone, but because of the ease with which people gravitated toward you. The way you listened. The way you carried warmth in your voice. The way you smiled.

God, that smile.

It was once the very thing I fell in love with. Soft, patient, almost reassuring without words. But over time, that same smile became the thing that drove me insane. Whenever I needed answers, clarity, reassurance — all I got was that calm smile, as though emotions could be settled quietly without ever being discussed aloud.

Maybe for you, they could. But not for me.

For me, silence was never peaceful. Silence was a room where insecurities multiplied.

I had told you, directly and indirectly, that I felt uncomfortable around that junior. Maybe not honestly at first, maybe not completely, but eventually I did. I had sensed the admiration in her eyes long before anyone else acknowledged it. Perhaps it was just a harmless crush. Perhaps it would have faded on its own. But what unsettled me was not her feelings.

It was your oblivion toward them. Or maybe not oblivion. Maybe kindness. And sometimes kindness is far crueler than cruelty itself.

Then one day I found out — accidentally, not from you — that both of you had started working together on a venture. Something promising. Something exciting. Something important enough to occupy your time and dreams.

When I confronted you, hurt spilling through every word, you simply told me you had planned to tell me once it became successful. Once it had “taken off.”

I remember staring at you in disbelief. You thought the problem was timing. But the problem was never the venture. The problem was that she — the very person you knew I already felt threatened by — had become part of something significant in your life before I even knew it existed.

“I should be there for the beginning too,” I had told you once. “Not only for the celebration after everything succeeds.”

But we remained standing on opposite sides of the same argument — you holding onto logic, me holding onto vulnerability. And somehow, vulnerability always sounded unreasonable when placed beside logic.

Since then, I stopped looking up whenever an aeroplane crossed the sky.

Once, I would drop everything for that fleeting moment. A silver speck against a sea of blue, a blinking light stitching its way through the darkness of night—I watched every one of them with the same fascination. It never grew old. No matter how many I had seen, each aeroplane felt like a small miracle, and my excitement remained that of a child who had just discovered the sky.

But after that, I trained myself not to look.

It wasn't the aeroplanes that had changed. It was me.

The truth is, I had shared that part of myself with only one person—you. Out of all the things I could have confessed, I had given you this small, unguarded piece of my heart. The way my eyes searched the clouds. The way I followed distant aircraft until they disappeared beyond the horizon. The way something so ordinary filled me with unreasonable joy.

It was a secret so insignificant that most people would have laughed at it, yet it felt sacred because it was mine. And because it was mine, I entrusted it only to you.

Then one day, someone else crafted an aeroplane from the same sky and shared the same excitement with you.

Perhaps it should not have mattered.

Perhaps I should have smiled at the coincidence and moved on.

But I am not made entirely of wisdom. I am made of flaws too.

And in that moment, jealousy found me.

Not because the sky belonged to me or wonder could ever belong to one person. But because the very thing I had revealed to you as something deeply personal suddenly felt ordinary. Replaceable. Shared.

It felt as though a secret language I had taught you was now being spoken by someone else.

I know how unfair that sounds.

I know that no one owns a feeling, and no one owns the right to marvel at an aeroplane crossing the heavens. Yet knowing that did not lessen the ache.

My heart shattered in ways I could never explain. Not dramatically, not all at once—but quietly, into a thousand tiny pieces. Every passing aircraft became a reminder of something I had once associated with us and could no longer bear to see.

So I stopped looking up, because every glance toward the sky carried the memory of a wound I did not know how to heal.



***Slave of inferiority***

*I feel ugly and tampered  
With crushed confidence and ego hampered*

*I feel cold and low  
With heavy heart and no place to go*

*I feel scared and lonely  
For just once I really want to be happy*

*The web in my mind is being knitted  
Is this the way should I really be treated*

*I have people around me and that too good ones  
But I don't relate to them in any sense*

*I feel like scattered and tattered  
Hoping for just one day to find out my old missing pieces  
And to fix it in a way and make peace within*

Then came the job. The new city. The selection. The escape.

I had fought hard for that opportunity. Out of everyone who applied, I was the only one selected, and for the first time in a long while, I felt proud of myself. I thought when I told you, you would celebrate me. I thought there would be happiness, excitement, maybe even relief that something good had finally happened to me.

But what I received instead was grief.

You spoke about distance. About being left behind. About how you had stayed because of me.

And maybe parting scared you. Maybe the fear of losing me was louder than my achievement in that moment. I understand that now. But back then, all I could hear was the silence around my victory. I wanted you to see how hard I had worked to become worthy of that position.

Instead, I walked away feeling guilty for succeeding.

Over time, I started rewriting every achievement of mine into betrayal. I blamed myself for moving away. For choosing growth. For not shrinking enough to keep love comfortable.

And then came the night that broke whatever fragile trust still remained inside me.

You called me that evening. We spoke normally. Casually. As though everything between us was fine. You never mentioned that your junior was staying at your apartment that night.

I found out accidentally through Ishan. The information slipped out of his mouth so naturally that I don't think he even realized what he had done.

When I confronted you, you simply told me that the information "wasn't important enough to mention."

To you, maybe it wasn't. To me, it shattered something irreversible. Because this wasn't a random girl. This was

someone I had repeatedly told you I felt uncomfortable about. Someone whose presence around you had already become a wound inside me long ago.

And still, you let her stay.

You slept in Ishan's room while she stayed in yours. Maybe nothing happened. Maybe truly nothing did. But somewhere in the middle of the night, she got scared from a dream and called out your name. You went to calm her down, and when she asked you to stay beside her because she was afraid to sleep alone, you did.

And maybe you did it out of kindness. Maybe you did it because you are genuinely a good person.

But what about me?

Did my discomfort never deserve that same urgency?

You always treated intentions as though they erased impact. As though because your heart was pure, the consequences would somehow stop hurting me.

But they didn't.

You never understood that loyalty is not only about crossing physical boundaries. Sometimes emotional negligence leaves bruises no betrayal ever could.

And maybe that is where we failed.

Not because we did not love each other enough. But because I needed transparency to feel safe, while you believed love should simply trust and endure.

I spent years blaming myself for ruining us. Calling myself oversensitive. Dramatic. Difficult. I convinced myself that maybe I had imagined everything too deeply, reacted too emotionally, loved too intensely.

But this is who I have always been.

I feel deeply. I notice silences. I remember omissions. I hear distance even in ordinary sentences.

And perhaps you loved me. Perhaps truly, sincerely, deeply.

But somewhere along the way, I stopped feeling emotionally chosen inside that love.

And that loneliness — the kind that exists while someone still holds your hand — was far more painful than the ending itself.

Your kindness eventually became something I could no longer carry gracefully.

Maybe the cruelest part is that it was never your kindness that was wrong — it was the way my heart began responding to it. In the beginning, I admired that part of you deeply. I loved how effortlessly you cared for people, how naturally people found comfort in you, how you never hesitated to show up for someone in need.

It made me fall in love with you even more. But somewhere along the way, that same kindness became the very thing I started resenting.

Because I did not want to be “someone” you cared for. I wanted to be special to you in ways no one else was.

And I know how selfish that sounds, especially when compared to the kind of person you were. You loved openly, generously, almost selflessly. While I... I loved with attachment, fear, longing, and an aching need to feel chosen differently from everyone else around you.

Maybe that was my flawed trait. My faulty trait. The part of me that could not always separate your goodness from my insecurities.

But I was human too.

And humans, no matter how deeply they love, are rarely free from selfishness when it comes to the people they cannot bear losing.

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At first, the melancholy came in small pieces — brief moments of heaviness, strange flashes of sadness, dreams that felt too real. Some nights I would cry in my sleep, and the next morning my throat would ache as if I had actually sobbed for hours. My eyes would carry dark, swollen circles, and I would spend half the day wondering why my chest felt heavy when nothing had technically happened.

I tried to fix it.

I read research papers. Searched Google endlessly. Watched TED Talks about healing, motivation, discipline, mental resilience — hoping something would click, something would push me back to who I used to be. I bookmarked videos, saved quotes, underlined advice.

Nothing stayed.

There were good days too — or at least better ones. On those days I felt almost normal. I would sit down and make lists, detailed and hopeful. Tasks to finish. People to reconnect with. I even wrote things like “*text Sachin,*” “*call Ishan,*” “*replying do this for yourself.*” It felt possible in the morning.

But by evening, something would shift.

Sometimes something small triggered it — a thought, a memory, a passing feeling. Sometimes it was just me, turning against myself without warning. And the darkness would return quietly, pulling me back.

I would retreat to my room.

The room itself is beautiful, honestly. A large window lets sunlight pour in during the afternoon. The curtains glow softly when the breeze moves them. There’s a small plant, I named it zing, by the window that always looks alive, always reaching for light. My desk is neat, journals stacked carefully, diaries gifted by you or purchased in the presence of you, pens arranged as if order can solve something. Fairy lights hang

above my bed. The walls are warm-toned, calm. Everything looks like a space someone would feel safe in.

And yet, for me, it feels like a vacuum.

The sunlight looks distant, almost artificial. The air feels still. The silence presses against me. I can sit there for hours and feel nothing except a quiet emptiness stretching wider and wider inside me. It isn't physically dark — but emotionally, it feels like a room with no doors, no windows, no way out.

There were times when I gathered all my strength just to write something down. A sentence in a journal. A thought on a random piece of paper — receipts, sticky notes, margins of notebooks. Anything I could find.

Amidst all the diaries stacked on my shelf, I chose the one with the brown cover.

The one with the words written in soft pink across the front:

*"I feel more of me when I am with you."*

A gift from you.

Just one of those ordinary days.

I had shown up at your flat far too early in the morning, much to your annoyance. I still remember the look on your face when you opened the door. You spent half the day pretending to be irritated with me, and I spent the other half trying to convince myself that you weren't. Yet by the evening, somehow, things had softened. As they always did back then.

And before the day ended, you handed me that diary.

Perhaps it was your way of apologizing. Perhaps it was your way of saying that everything was alright. That everything would remain alright.

Back then, I believed it.

Now, years and distances later, I sit with the same diary open on my lap, filling its pages with stories of absence,

confusion, unanswered questions, and all the ways a heart can break without making a sound.

The title has become a perfect piece of irony.

Every time I open it, those words stare back at me.

*"I feel more of me when I am with you."*

And every time, they sting a little.

Because I have never felt less like myself than I do now.

Yet I continue writing in it.

A half-read novel and a half-written journal have always felt like sins to me. I cannot abandon either, no matter how painful they become. So I keep turning the pages. I keep filling the empty spaces.

Sometimes on days when I miss you.

Sometimes on days when I am angry with you.

Most often on days when I cannot make sense of my own thoughts.

Writing has always been my way back to myself.

And this diary, despite the ache attached to it, has become a refuge. A silent witness to every version of me that has existed since I moved out from the relationship initially emotionally and then physically. It holds my grief without interruption, my questions without answers, my memories without judgment.

So page after page, I continue.

A strange ritual of healing and hurting at the same time.

And perhaps one day, when the final page is written and the cover is closed for the last time, the words on the front will stop feeling like irony and become what they were always meant to be— or may be not.

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And then there were the moments with his chat.

I would open Sachin's messages. Scroll up. Read old conversations. Type something. Delete it. Type again. Delete again.

One thing about me that always fascinated you was how quickly I fell asleep.

You would watch me lie down, pull a blanket over myself, close my eyes, and disappear into sleep within minutes. Every single time, you reacted as though you had witnessed some extraordinary talent.

"You sleep so fast," you would say, half amused, half amazed.

And every time, I would laugh.

To me, there was nothing remarkable about it. Isn't that how sleep works? You lie down, you close your eyes, and eventually sleep arrives. I could never understand why you found it so fascinating.

Now I do.

Because sleep is not as simple as I once believed.

Not everyone lies down and falls asleep.

Not everyone is fortunate enough to escape their thoughts so easily.

These days, when night arrives, I find myself searching for something to fill the silence. A documentary about the oceans. A video about distant forests. Rain sounds. Soft music. Guided meditations narrated by strangers with gentle voices.

Anything.

Anything that might distract my mind long enough to let sleep find me.

So I press play. I listen. I wait.

But sleep no longer arrives the way it once did.

Instead, my thoughts wander through familiar corridors and somehow always find their way back to you.

The irony is not lost on me.

For years, I never understood your amazement at my ability to sleep. Now I understand it better than I wish I did.

Because I have become you.

I have become the person who lies awake staring into darkness long after the world has gone quiet. The person who searches for background noise because silence has become too loud. The person who bargains with sleep instead of welcoming it.

And on the nights when sleep refuses to come, I remember you more than ever.

Perhaps because the world is finally still enough for your absence to be heard.

Or perhaps because the loneliness that once belonged to you has somehow found its way into me.

Whatever the reason, I now understand what you meant all those years ago.

I have returned to that chat thousands of times without sending a single word.

Some nights, I slept with the chat open, phone dimming beside me, pretending that maybe just being there was enough.

I kept telling myself I was protecting him.

That if I spoke honestly about how deep my sadness felt, I would drown him in it. That I was saving him by staying quiet. Because my sadness doesn't feel small. It feels deep — abysmal, dark, endless. Sometimes I imagine it as a place so heavy that anyone who steps inside might never find their way out again.

And in those moments, I feel like a monster living at the bottom of it — capable of damaging anyone who comes too close.

So I stay silent. Not because I don't care. But because I'm afraid that loving me in this version might hurt the people I love the most.

***Thinking over/overthinking***

*I don't know  
where thinking ends  
and overthinking begins.*

*I carry conversations in my head,  
longer than the nights allow,  
speaking fluently to silence,  
answering questions no one asked aloud.*

*I narrate, rehearse, revise,  
build entire worlds within,  
and when the pitcher overflows,  
it spills as quiet tears,  
as pauses too heavy to cross,  
as pain disguised as thought.*

*It's not that I don't want to share.  
I do. I ache to.  
But fear sits between my words and me  
like a fragile glass wall.  
Fear of being misunderstood,  
of being reduced to a version  
someone finds convenient.  
Fear of judgment,  
of loneliness wearing the mask of honesty,  
of love withdrawing once it sees me whole.*

*I thought if I connected deeply enough,  
someone could heal the wound I carry,  
as if closeness itself were medicine.  
But wounds don't vanish that way.*

*And when things remain on the surface,  
when depth is avoided,  
I retreat.  
I drop the trail mid-sentence,  
mid-hope.*

*Then I return to the only place I know well—  
my mind.  
Where I think it over again,  
or maybe start overthinking it once more,  
looping between what was felt  
and what was never said.*

*Perhaps one day  
I'll learn that sharing isn't losing,  
that being seen doesn't always mean being left,  
and that love—real love—  
doesn't ask me to be quieter,  
only truer.*

*Until then,  
I sit with my thoughts,  
not enemies, not friends,  
just echoes waiting  
to be heard.*

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For your birthdays, I always wished you. Just never in the ways you would have expected. Not through a phone call. Not through a text message. Not even through a passing conversation.

And I know you must have waited for it all day.

I know you. I know how quietly expectant you become on days that matter to you. How you pretend not to care, yet keep checking your phone unconsciously. How a small gesture from the right person can soften your entire day.

And perhaps somewhere inside you, you waited for me too.

But I stopped myself every single time from initiating anything. Because I knew what would happen if I did.

One message would become a conversation. A conversation would become familiarity. Familiarity would begin reopening every wound I had spent months trying to survive.

And love, for me, was never something I knew how to touch casually. It always came with a cascade of emotions — longing, grief, attachment, hope, guilt — all collapsing into each other until I could no longer tell whether I was healing or destroying myself again.

So I chose silence instead.

But silence is a deceptive thing.

People assume silence means absence. What they never understand is that sometimes silence is restraint in its most painful form.

Because every year, on the night before your birthday, I stayed awake.

No matter how exhausted I was, no matter how badly I wanted to forget you, sleep would never arrive easily that night. I would lie there in the dark, staring at the ceiling,

thinking about all the birthdays I had known of yours, all the versions of you that existed across different years of my life.

And then, very quietly, almost like a prayer spoken to no god in particular, I would mumble a birthday wish into the air for you. Soft enough that nobody could hear it. Soft enough that even the universe might miss it.

And then I would close my eyes and go to sleep — loving you silently, the only way I had taught myself to survive you.

### ***In the search of an eye in the tornado***

*In the depths of despair, I find myself lost,  
Yearning for the love that came at such a cost.  
I miss everything about you, my heart's desire,  
But now you're gone, consumed by the fire.  
The day I dreaded arrived like a furious storm,  
Tearing through my soul, leaving me forlorn.  
I stand here weakened, vulnerable, and alone,  
Aching for the warmth of love I've never known.  
It unfolded before me, this heart-wrenching play,  
Crushing my spirit, shattering my light of day.  
Like a tornado's wrath, it swept away my peace,  
Leaving behind fragments of hope's sweet release.  
I search for the eye amidst this chaotic spree,  
To find solace, to set my troubled spirit free.  
But alas, it eludes me, a distant, fleeting dream,  
Leaving me stranded, adrift in an endless stream.  
Mocking whispers surround me, taunting with glee,  
Reminding me that love was never meant to be.  
The forces of nature, they whispered their warning,  
Yet I held on tight, with love as my adorning.  
But you couldn't stay, for reasons I now understand,  
And I'm left here, lost, trying to withstand.*

*In this relentless pursuit for that elusive peace,  
I'm drenched in vulnerability, longing for release.  
Oh, where is the eye, the calm within the storm?  
To mend my shattered heart and make me reborn.  
I'm left with nothing but my fragile, wounded soul,  
Yearning for a love that will make me whole.  
But through the darkness, I'll keep searching still,  
For a glimmer of hope, a chance to heal.  
Though my heart feels heavy, burdened by despair,  
I'll hold onto the belief that love is still out there.*

It wasn't just the wish whispered in the middle of the night for you. I also made sure that every year, there was always a cake waiting for you to cut on your birthday.

You were never really fond of birthday celebrations, especially the whole ritual of cutting cakes, but somehow, I loved it enough for the both of us. So I made it my little responsibility. I would text Ishan, irritate him to the fullest extent possible, and force him to buy you a cake — while strictly making sure he never told you it was me behind it.

It was never something grand. Just a cake. Just a quiet arrangement. But somehow, it soothed my nerves to know that the immense love I carried for you still had somewhere to exist. And maybe it always will. If there was any possible way for me to still remain around you, even invisibly, I took it.

Do you remember the night? We spoke about how impossible it felt to become thirty, how adding a “3” to our age suddenly felt terrifying to me. You laughed at it — and at me — and told me that as long as I was with you, you would never feel a day older. You said that if spending a lifetime together was what biology called aging, then you would rather call it wine fine aging. And we laughed together after that.

That night, I found out Ishan was away in his hometown. So once again, I irritated him endlessly until he somehow

managed to send you a cake through Zomato or Swiggy or whatever he could arrange at that hour.

It was a chocolate truffle. I don't know if you ever noticed why. Maybe you were too uninterested in birthdays to care. But it was intentional. Because it was the last birthday before the number three entered our age, I wanted the celebration to belong to me too, in some small hidden way.

You always loved cheesecake. I always loved chocolate truffle.

And somehow, it became funny over the years that on almost every birthday, Ishan ended up receiving more gifts than you did. The next time, he demanded a Harry Potter musical set in return for helping me again. I remember laughing at how shamelessly he negotiated every year, but beneath all the drama, there was also something deeply considerate about him — the way he always did exactly as I asked and kept his promise of never letting you know it was me behind any of it.

And maybe that was me being myself again — trying to stay relevant in your life in whichever little ways I could, even when I no longer truly was.

Or maybe I was. I just chose otherwise.

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One day, while helping Maa declutter her wardrobe, I came across a diary tucked between folded clothes. It looked new — almost untouched. I shouldn't have opened it, but I did.

There was only one page written. Just one. And in that page, she had written that she felt like she was slipping into depression... because of her daughter.

Because of me.

I remember staring at the words, reading them again and again, hoping I had misunderstood. My chest felt hollow. I had listened to her all my life — tried to be understanding, tried to adjust, tried to do things right. And yet, there it was, written plainly, quietly, in her own handwriting.

Out of everything she could have written... that was what she chose for the first page.

I felt shocked. Hurt. Angry. Guilty — all at once. It felt like blame pressed into paper.

For a long time after that, the words stayed with me. They replayed in my mind in moments I didn't expect, like a sentence that refused to end.

Sometimes I wonder if this heaviness runs in blood — if this tendency toward gloom was inherited, passed down quietly through generations. Maybe I got it from her. Maybe that's why it feels so familiar, so deeply rooted.

But even then, I know one thing. I would never blame her for the way I feel. I would never write her name as the reason I feel like a loser all the time. Because I know how heavy that blame feels. And I wouldn't wish that weight on anyone — not even the person who unknowingly placed it on me.

Then, slowly, I went numb.

I don't know exactly when it began — whether it was time settling heavily inside me, or a series of small things that kept piling up until they shaped this version of me that I both hate and fear at the same time. It felt like something quietly moved into my heart and refused to leave.

In between all of this, I tried to reconnect with you.

I really did.

But every time I thought about reaching out, it felt wrong — as if I was only coming to you because I was sad. And the truth was... I was sad almost all the time. I didn't want to

become the person who only appeared with heaviness, with problems, with silence that needed fixing.

So I stopped myself.

I cut back on everything, almost without realizing it. My pocket money. Birthday gifts. Birthday parties. Meeting friends. Family gatherings. Even my opinions, my excitement — the parts of me that once felt bright. I kept shrinking myself, hoping maybe if I took up less space, things would get easier.

And still, somehow, I felt blamed.

There was a time when I cried so hard I thought my chest would collapse. It was when I lost my maternal aunt — someone I was deeply close to. After my naniji, she was the person who carried warmth effortlessly, not just for me but for everyone around her. She made people feel seen without trying.

The morning the news came, I was half-awake. I remember hearing my father's voice first. He had answered the call and was carefully searching for the right words, as if language itself could soften the truth. When he told us, my mother and I both broke at the same time. The house felt suddenly unfamiliar — too quiet, too still.

I took leave for three or four days after that.

Before the news came, I had actually thought of meeting you during that break. I thought maybe I could gather courage, maybe I could make things right between us, maybe talking would help me breathe again.

But the night I arrived home, the next morning everything collapsed.

I remember picking up my phone almost immediately, wanting to tell you. My hands were shaking. I typed out a message — long, honest, vulnerable.

And then I deleted it. I wrote again. Deleted again. I couldn't send it.

I kept thinking you would see me as someone who always returned with the same old sorrow. Someone who only brought heaviness into your space. And I never wanted to burden you with that.

But believe me — I understand the pain of losing people.

I haven't only lost people to death. I've lost people while they were still alive too. So many connections faded because I never reached out. The silence between messages grew longer, until the distance felt impossible to cross. Every day I thought about texting, about coming back, about explaining — and every day the gap felt larger.

At some point, that space became terrifying. It felt like a void — wide and endless. Sometimes it felt so big that I thought I could disappear inside it completely. That's what it looked like to me. Not just distance. Something vast enough to swallow everything I wanted to say.

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I was sent to Trissur for an office assignment once — a short work trip, just a few days long. I remember being genuinely happy about it. It felt nice to travel again, to step into a different city, to meet new people. I even told everyone around me, almost proudly, that my cousin brother also lived there.

After finishing work for the day, I left him a message, casually asking if we could meet if he had time after office. He replied quickly and said yes. It felt comforting. Familiar. Safe.

He came to pick me up from my hotel. We grabbed quick snacks at McDonald's first — nothing fancy, just fries and cold drinks while he joked about how tired office life had made him. After that, he said there was an office party and insisted I join. I agreed.

At the party, he introduced me to his colleagues. Music was playing, people laughed loudly, conversations flowed easily.

I tried to blend in, smiling politely, answering questions when spoken to. He asked me about my work, my future plans, even teased me about how shy and quiet I had always been.

I answered simply.

At some point someone handed me another drink. Then another. I remember saying I usually don't drink much. Somebody laughed and said it was barely anything. After that, the evening starts feeling strangely blurred in my head — not entirely missing, just uneven around the edges, like parts of it were smudged away.

By the time the party ended, it was very late.

I remember wanting to change the song playing in the car later. Wanting to ask him to increase the volume. Wanting to take off my heels because they were hurting badly.

But I didn't. I stayed formal, reserved— like I always do.

While driving, he asked whether I wanted to go back to my hotel or come to his place since he had recently shifted there. He called it a challenge — said I needed to loosen up, live a little.

I hesitated.

You know the kind of rules I grew up with — the invisible boundaries my mother had drawn into my behaviour since childhood. But then I told myself, why was I always so stiff, so cautious? Maybe I needed to stop being so guarded all the time.

So I said yes.

When we reached, he tried to make me comfortable — offered water, asked if I wanted something to eat, showed me around casually. I was tired, exhausted really, but trying to stay polite.

That exhaustion kept getting heavier.

At first I thought maybe it was just the long day, the noise, the drinks. But my body felt... wrong somehow. Slow. Delayed. Even lifting my head properly started feeling difficult. My

thoughts were awake, but my limbs felt disconnected from them.

Then the questions started changing.

At first I didn't understand. They felt slightly uncomfortable, but I brushed them aside. I have always been someone who answers quickly, simply, without questioning intentions. I skipped past the discomfort, thinking maybe I was just overthinking.

And then, suddenly — he made a move.

Everything inside me froze.

My body went numb and cold, as if I had been placed on a slab of ice in a mortuary. My heart started pounding so loudly I couldn't hear what he was saying anymore. Maybe he was saying something to calm me down — I honestly don't know. The sounds blurred into noise.

I remember trying to move back.

I remember his hand catching my wrist.

After that, my memory becomes terrifyingly incomplete.

Not blank.

Just fractured.

Small disconnected flashes.

The smell of his room.

The weight of my own body feeling impossible to control.

His voice close to me somewhere.

The ceiling fan spinning slowly above.

My own heartbeat sounding distant, muffled.

And me saying, in disbelief, almost pleading—

“Bhaiya... main aapki behen hoon.”

I don't know what happened after that sentence.

Sometimes I tell myself nothing happened. That maybe he stopped. Maybe I managed to pull away. Maybe my fear exaggerated everything.

But there are pieces I cannot explain.

The strange heaviness in my body the next morning. The soreness I kept trying not to think about. How difficult it was to fully remember the sequence of events no matter how hard I tried.

The missing spaces frighten me more than certainty would have.

I just remember wanting to escape.

At some point, I managed to walk to the bathroom. I locked the door and held onto the sink, shaking. My phone was in my pocket. Without thinking, I opened your chat.

I didn't text you. I couldn't. But seeing your name on the screen soothed me in a way I can't explain. I cried silently, whispering to myself — if I tell my Sachin, he will tear this world apart for me.

I talked to you in my head that night. And somehow, just imagining your presence gave me strength.

When I came out, I crawled into bed and pretended to be asleep. Or maybe I actually drifted in and out — I still can't tell. Time itself felt distorted. On the other side he sat awake, working on his laptop as if nothing had happened.

I remember staring at the faint light from the screen cutting across the darkness.

At 4 a.m., I woke up properly and asked him to drop me back to my hotel. The drive was silent. Neither of us mentioned anything. When I stepped out of the car, I said "thank you" in a voice so soft I barely heard it myself. He left without looking back.

The moment I entered my hotel room, I went straight to the bathroom. I scrubbed my skin as if something dark was covering me, something sticky I couldn't wash away — like tar clinging to me.

I stood there for a long time.

And something inside me broke.

What happened that night exists inside me like torn pages from a book — some parts visible, others violently missing. But whatever the truth was, my body remembered fear long before my mind could form complete memories around it.

After that, nothing felt simple anymore.

***Not the kind of love I had ever prayed for***

*Dear cousin brother*

*Not the kind of love  
I had ever prayed for.*

*You taught my body  
how to fear familiarity,  
how to shrink beneath eyes  
that linger too long.*

*Now even softness startles me.  
Even kindness arrives  
wearing danger's face.*

*You left no visible bruises—  
only doubt,  
only silence,  
only a girl  
who apologises for existing  
inside her own skin.*

*And perhaps to you  
it was nothing—  
a passing moment.*

*But to me,  
it became the border*

*between who I was  
and who I survived into.*

The next month, my periods were due.

But they never came.

At first, I wasn't alarmed. Delayed periods were normal for me. My cycle had never behaved properly — sometimes late by days, sometimes by weeks. Everyone around me treated it casually, so I had learned to do the same.

I kept waiting.

One week passed.

Then another.

I told myself not to think unnecessarily.

But somewhere around the one-and-a-half month mark, something inside me snapped awake.

A thought entered my head so suddenly it made my chest go cold.

What if something had happened that night?

The memory of my cousin brother leaning toward me flashed in fragments again — his hand around my wrist, my body refusing to respond properly, the missing spaces in my memory that I had spent weeks trying to bury under denial.

I remember sitting on my bed staring at the wall for a very long time after that thought appeared.

My breathing became shallow.

No.

No, no, no.

I started calculating dates repeatedly in my head. Trying to remember details I couldn't fully remember. Trying to reconstruct a night that existed inside me like broken glass.

I was terrified.

But more than fear, I felt trapped.

Who could I tell?

How could I explain something I myself wasn't even sure about?

I had no proof.

No certainty.

Only fear.

Only silence.

And silence had always been my specialty.

So I did what frightened people do when they are alone and desperate — I turned to the internet.

Late nights became endless searches.

“How to get periods naturally.”

“Home remedies for delayed periods.”

“Things that induce bleeding.”

“Signs of stress delay.”

“Early pregnancy symptoms.”

“Can trauma delay periods?”

Every search made me panic more.

I started consuming everything I found online.

Papaya.

Ginger water.

Ajwain.

Turmeric milk.

Kadha.

Teas with ingredients I had never even heard of before.

Anything strangers online claimed could “bring periods faster.”

Every morning my stomach burned.

My body radiated heat constantly, as if fire had settled beneath my skin. I would wake up sweating even with the fan running. My chest felt heavy. My abdomen cramped faintly all day long.

But still — nothing came.

Every day without bleeding felt like a countdown toward something unnamed and horrifying.

And then one afternoon, it happened.

The pain started suddenly.

Not normal cramps.

Not the dull ache I was used to during periods.

This felt violent.

A sharp twisting pain spread through my lower abdomen so intensely that I doubled over. I remember gripping the edge of the table and struggling to breathe properly.

I barely made it to the bathroom.

And then—

something released from inside me.

A large, thick lump of blood and clot fell into the toilet.

For one second I simply stared at it.

I can still remember how unnatural it looked.

Too heavy.

Too solid.

Dark red mixed with something pale.

My stomach turned instantly.

I vomited right there.

The pain became unbearable after that. My body was shaking uncontrollably. Sweat dripped down my back even though my hands felt ice cold. My heartbeat was so fast it scared me. There were hot flushes moving through my body as if lava was circulating beneath my skin.

I sat on the bathroom floor crying and holding my abdomen while more blood kept coming.

And all I could think was—

What was that?

Was it just a blood clot?

Was it tissue damaged because of all the things I had consumed?

Was it something normal that I was overthinking?

Or...

was it something else?

A fertilized life that never fully became one.

I don't know.

And maybe I never will.

But uncertainty can haunt a person more cruelly than truth sometimes.

For days afterward, I couldn't stop replaying the image in my head.

The shape of it.

The weight of it.

The sound it made when it fell.

I began noticing how people around me moved through life so normally while I carried this unbearable invisible thing inside me. At breakfast tables, in office meetings, during casual conversations — nobody knew there was a locked room inside my mind screaming endlessly.

And I became very good at locking it away.

I had always been good at that.

At swallowing pain before it became visible.  
At behaving normally while collapsing internally.  
At carrying memories silently until they hardened into  
part of my bones.

But this was different.

This didn't just leave fear behind.

It changed the way I looked at closeness itself.

After that, safety stopped feeling real to me.

Relationships stopped feeling simple.

Even affection began carrying shadows beneath it.

Because once your body learns that danger can arrive  
wearing familiarity, trust never returns in the same shape  
again.

And somewhere deep inside me, a terrifying thought  
settled permanently—

that maybe something terrible had happened to me...

and I might never know for sure.

I tried reaching out to Ishan. With him, my mind didn't  
twist things the way it did with you. There wasn't that deep  
wiring, that intricate emotional thread that made every word  
heavier. With you, everything felt layered — meaning beneath  
meaning, silence beneath silence. So, coming back to you felt  
harder. Riskier.

With Ishan, I could send normal messages at first. Casual  
things. Neutral replies. But even that faded. Gradually, I  
ghosted him too. Not because he did anything wrong — but  
because I didn't want to burden him either. I was already  
exhausted from carrying myself; I didn't want to carry the  
responsibility of being “okay” for someone else.

Sometimes I felt like my brain was severed from the rest  
of me.

As if my thoughts were operating independently, detached, malfunctioning. I was tired — not physically, but existentially tired. Tired of performing myself. Tired of pretending to fit in rooms where I constantly felt like a misfit. Tired of overanalysing everything until I became the victim of my own introspection.

At first, the pain was just thoughts. Then it became physical. A heaviness in my chest. A tightness in my throat. A dull ache that had no visible wound. That's when I made a quiet decision — I would not inflict this on you. I would not drag you into something I couldn't even name.

All I wanted was to end the feeling.

And somewhere along the way, I convinced myself that if I walked alone, I could save the people I loved. So I slowly stopped manufacturing love inside me. The romance, the glittery excitement, the warmth I once felt so easily — they began dying quietly.

I became a grave.

And I have always seen you as a garden.

You — warmth, affection, courage, humility, that radiating smile that could dissolve tension in seconds. You have been my protector in ways you may not even know. And because of that, I began triggering myself further — telling myself that I had to at least protect you from the flames devouring me.

But what I am going through feels darker than protection.

It feels like something inseparable from me, like a shadow that grows taller with time. It slowly eclipses my personality. And that eclipse fills me with guilt — heavy, bulky guilt that sits on my shoulders like punishment.

I can never outrun the love you poured into me.

You could argue that you loved me to a fault — beyond inconvenience, beyond logic. And maybe you did.

But how could I love you back when I didn't recognize myself anymore? When I felt fractured?

Your timeline feels linear — simple, steady. You see, you feel, you respond. Mine feels circular. Every thought loops back. Every memory replays. Every attempt to move forward feels haunted by something unfinished.

In the beginning, when this darkness crept in quietly, I was terrified of losing you.

Then, when it took over more fully, guilt resurfaced — especially in my loneliest moments. And I was alone often. Even in rooms full of people, I felt isolated inside myself.

That's when I began hating myself more.

My first act of control, I think, was losing you before you could be lost.

So I lost you.

Sometimes I sit alone and wonder if I forced you away — convincing myself it was protection, when maybe it was fear.

I tell myself that if one day I manage to establish myself again — as a stable, social, sober version of myself — I would want a son like you.

Courageous. Kind. Honest. Steady. Someone who stays.

And it hurts me to say this, but I would never want a daughter like me.

Someone who runs. Someone who leaves. Someone who confuses protection with abandonment.

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