

She hated the smell of tablets. It smelled putrid, a smell that wafted to you and you wouldn't notice until it hit you straight in the face and you recoiled from it with your hand clutched to your nose. As Juhi went through the bottles of tablets that messily crowded through the cabinet, she picked them out one by one, checking their expiration dates and writing them down on her mother's old composition notebook, the ugly yellow cheetah print-esque cover the only slight color throughout the rest of the house. She remembered when amma would get mad at her for not taking her tablets. Stacks of them piled in her dorm's drawers in freshman year of college, conveniently forgotten until 49 packets were stashed away (by her mother's count), and the smell hit her all at once again when she opened the drawer in the morning before her calculus class.

Through the years, her mother never gave up trying to get Juhi to take them. Not that amma could try anymore, however. Amma was long gone, whether Juhi wanted it that way or not. Amma was dead.

She stared down at the only bottle that had lasted throughout the years, Vitamin C, as the realization swept through her all over again. Vitamin C stared back at her.

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After she finished dragging out the boxes of expired tablets and food in the kitchen to the garbage can, Juhi walked back inside, setting the sole bottle of Vitamin C onto the scratched up dining table, and dusted her hands from any other tablet remains. Her mother's house was reasonably sized, a townhouse in the suburbs of North Carolina. This was where Juhi had grown up, under the watchful eye of her mother, and far away from her current setting and job in Chicago.

Moving back here to take care of amma's belongings made her uncomfortable, so much so that she almost decided to get an apartment instead, but her cheapskate instinct kicked in and put her right back in her childhood bed. Juhi could well afford it, but for the first time she listened to the internal voice of her mother.

Instead, she considered getting a dog after Miranda, her best friend from college, had worried over her staying there by herself, but after all that had happened, Juhi didn't know if she had the energy for one. Besides, now, she wasn't alone. She had Ben.

Her head turned to see Ben float towards her, and she smiled for the first time that day. "Did anything fun while I went out?"

He shook his head no. "Did you throw everything out?"

"Yeah."

He didn't respond as she sat on the sofa, too lazy to get up and take a shower, but too dirtied by her outside clothes to lay on her bed out of exhaustion.

Ben sat next to her as well, as best as he could for a ghost. She found Ben when she came home a few weeks ago, noticing something off. She initially thought it was nothing, but Ben had surprised her when she was crying in the living room late at night.

"*Are you okay?*"

It was the first time someone had asked her that in so long, that she almost burst into tears all over again. Except she didn't, and threw the tv remote in his face, but then the remote had fallen *through* him instead of hitting *on* him.

When the both of them had calmed down, him from his shock of her seeing him, and her from the shock that he *existed*, she had asked him what he was doing in her mother's house, but

he said he didn't know—that once he woke up as a ghost on the same day he died two years ago, he had been here, and he couldn't leave.

She couldn't get over her shock. "Why here?"

"I knew her." Maybe that was why, he said. He had been at a hospital, and amma had worked there. Helped him.

At first, it had irked her. That there was some part of her mother's past that Juhi had never known. That Ben had been exposed to a side of her mother that she would never be the subject of. That a ghost was there for her mother's death when even she wasn't.

Juhi didn't know whether to trust him, but there was nothing she could do about it. Caution lined her interactions with him for quite a while, but at some point, even though it had taken her a while to get used to him, it became normalcy.

"How much have you finished?" He was talking about the state of the house.

"I went through the kitchen today." She said, reaching for the remote and clicking the TV on. After clearing out her mother's spice cabinet and mismatched collection of Corell dishes, she had found old bottles of avakaya, some of which her mother had been saving since before Juhi's grandmother died. She had wondered if her mom and her grandmother were together now. Since Ben was real, then the afterlife could be real as well, right? The single thought made the sourness of the avakaya go away after she had dipped her finger in the jar and licked the red chutney from her finger.

Even if amma hadn't been the best mother to Juhi, she had been an amazing daughter. The most filial, respecting, and loving daughter that anyone could have wished to have. Amma loved Juhi's grandparents so much that she would cry to young Juhi late at night that it was her own fault her parents were dead.

She was everything Juhi wasn't in that regard, she supposed. Maybe amma had expected the same from her. Maybe amma wanted Juhi to regret her mother's death as she had with her own parents. Maybe amma wanted Juhi to blame herself for her death.

She wouldn't be surprised if that was the case.

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She finally got back to looking through her mother's belongings a few days later, the only thing pushing her to leave her room being Ben (verbally, not physically; he was a ghost). Back in Chicago, her job, a Product Analyst at a tech company, was what got her up and moving, but this time she didn't even have that after she took leave to sort through her mother's things.

Her boss was surprisingly a family man through and through. When he had heard about her situation, he insisted on her taking a month off, even two. "Work if you can in the second month, but if you can't, I understand." Anyone else would have been grateful for those words, but Juhi wished he had forced her to work instead. She could have ignored everything that had happened and buried herself in something tangible.

But instead, she was here, walking through the halls of a dim townhouse, the walls gray from the lack of light. Juhi sat in the living room, opening the drawers of the TV stand. She flipped through stacks of DVDs, her eyes glazing over her mother's writing that labeled each and every one of Juhi's achievements. *Juhi's First Birthday. Juhi's Kindergarten Graduation. Juhi's first day of Middle School. Juhi's trip to Disney Land.*

She turned on the TV and popped one of the DVDs into the player. The video flickered to life, and she watched as her mother zoomed in on her face. Ben sat beside her, watching her instead.

*"Juhi! Come, come, look here!"*

Juhi had always looked. But now, she turned off the TV instead, because although photos of her mother never made her cry, videos always did.

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Ben was her age, 29 while she was 30, surprisingly. He had looked young from the beginning, but she had never asked because she didn't want to hurt his feelings—maybe he was sensitive about how he died at a young age—but when she finally did ask, he didn't seem to mind.

“How did it happen?” She brought up as they were sitting in the living room, in the middle of another of their long conversations about everything and nothing. It was either this or try her hand at drawing again, and there was no contest. Juhi felt like she could never draw anything good anymore.

He shrugged. “The stupidest way anyone could die really. I killed myself.”

Her breath stilled at that moment, and she stared at him. “I-I'm sorry.”

He told her not to feel bad because he had done it to himself. It was a quick and easy death, he assured her, an overdose of drugs. “Sometimes it feels freeing because I don't feel that overwhelming addiction anymore. But sometimes it fucking sucks because look where I ended up.” He gestured to the area around him. “Still in the human world, tied down by my lingering regrets.”

“If you knew you would turn into, whatever you are now, would you have...?”

“Before... no. And I think that's the regret that keeps me here.”

They both took a moment to digest that information before he spoke again, hesitating.

“Actually,” he admitted, “I met your mother at a rehab facility before I died.” She looked at him, surprised. Why hadn’t he just told her?

He shrugged lamely, saying that people had usually judged him for it.

“But your mom didn’t. She helped me. A lot.”

A bitter taste spread through her mouth. Helped him? How? Juhi couldn’t fathom the possibility that her mother would have helped someone—nonetheless Ben, who had been a drug addict. Juhi couldn’t fathom her mother understanding anyone who didn’t fit into the narrow mindset of traditionality that she herself had failed time and time again.

All this time, there had been a certain acceptance for Juhi—that even though amma had rejected her for who she was, it was okay because amma rejected anyone who didn’t fit in her standards. But here Ben was, saying something completely different. It made her gut churn, and her brow furrow as she looked towards the ghost.

She went to sleep wondering what else Ben regretted, what else he might know about her mother, what would happen if she died in that moment, and if she too would turn into a ghost like him.

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“Is love really unconditional?” She asked Ben once late at night, staring at the ceiling. She was in her mother’s bedroom, slipping the cool comforter over herself. Juhi remembered sleeping here as a kid, curled up in her mother’s warm and cozy arms. Amma would tell her that she would love Juhi forever, and that Juhi was all she had. Not Juhi’s shithole dad. Not amma’s siblings. Only Juhi.

Ben hummed from the side. “Not always.” She waited for him to explain why he thought so, but Ben never talked much about his past. Since Ben had been at the house since two years ago, it gnawed at her. What he maybe knew that she didn’t. She didn’t want to push though, and he instead pointed the question towards her. “What about you?”

She thought about her mother’s love towards her. “...No. I don’t think so either.” Amma would say she loved her forever in one breath, but then say she would leave Juhi forever if she didn’t do what she was told in another. Just as Juhi was all amma had, amma was all Juhi had, her mother would tell her. Juhi grew up wondering when she would do something wrong enough in her mother’s eyes so that amma would leave, but the better and more positive side of her won out, assuring her that her mother’s love was indeed unconditional.

But it wasn’t. Not when Juhi moved into her dorm when she was 18 and refused to move back in, not when Juhi and her mother stopped talking as frequently in college, not when Juhi defied her mother in every way possible to escape the overprotective shell of her life.

She had gone a little bit crazy in college. It was the freedom. So much of it that it left her breathless and wondering if she would ever get a chance to experience it again. Juhi had craved attention and love and feeling. So, she did things she had never done before. Partying late at night until she would come back to her dorm shit-faced, mascara smeared, drunk at 4 am in the morning, collapsing on her bed and waking up so hung over that she skipped class more often than not. Wearing clothes she would never dare show her mother and her conservative ways and incessant need to never wear anything above her knee. Going on dates with guys that amma would never approve of. Changing her major to business, which amma deemed useless, and not becoming a doctor like her mother had wanted. Introducing her mother to her then-boyfriend Ryan in senior year, and watching her mother fly off the handle for the final time.

When her mom would look at her and say, “you’ve changed,” disgusted, like it was the worst thing in the world. Like she always wanted Juhi to stay exactly the way she was when her daughter had once cuddled up into her arms.

*“I told you I would leave you.” Amma warned.*

Juhi didn’t think she could bear it if her mother ever did.

So she left her mother first.

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The following day, she went through the rest of her mother’s room, the messy condition of the room a trait she had inherited from her mother herself. Ben watched from the side as she went through the drawers, peeling apart beautiful Indian dresses that shimmered and pulled golden and silver light from every angle. Some of them were hers, lehenga cholis and half saris and anarkalis dating back from kindergarten and after, but the saris and kurtas were her mother’s. She found jewelry that she carefully put among the rest of the jewelry she had picked up from her mother’s locker in the bank, now a combination of heirlooms from four generations past, and newer creations her mother had gotten made for Juhi.

*“These will be yours one day, Juhi.”* Amma told her that as they were sitting on her grandmother’s old bed, who had passed away a month ago on their trip to India. Juhi had nodded, looking towards the heirlooms that had once been amma’s grandmothers laid out on the mattress. She had never expected to receive them so soon.

All the jewelry reminded her of amma dressing up to attend functions with aunties she didn’t really like, conversation about who had gotten which dress from where and which jewelry made from whom, and the gossip about Reina Auntie’s son, who had run away from home.



*“It’s a good thing she’s not here. How would she be able to look around, seeing everyone else’s kids doing well?”* Kruthi Auntie had said.

When they got back home that day, her mother took off Juhi’s jewelry in the same dresser mirror that she looked into now, and expressed her disapproval to her. “Last I remembered, Ram was such a nice boy.” She scowled. “Look at what he turned into!”

Juhi had agreed wholeheartedly, voicing her mother’s complaints even when she was in high school. She hadn’t known that she would also be subject of gossip in Indian functions later in the future, much like Ram had in the past. But unlike Juhi, Ram had eventually returned back to his family, managing to patch it up with his family after he committed to getting a PhD in chemistry. *Technically a doctor!* Juhi couldn’t relate. The last conversation she had with her mother was three years ago, an obligatory checkup to see if the other was alive.

After they had stopped talking, at least there had been a hope that things could change if Juhi reached out. A hope for something being temporary rather than a deafening silence of forever. But now, all she had was a house, and Ben.

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Ben snapped her out of her thoughts with questions of curiosity. It prevented her from immersing into each thing of her and her mother’s combined past she would hold in her arms, and she was thankful for it. It made the process of going through her mother’s things less intensive and mind bending. She wasn’t alone.

“Do you remember much about your own family?” She asked Ben offhandedly one day when she was flipping through photo albums of her and various family members that dotted the pictures. Some even had pictures of her father, surprising considering how much her mother

disliked him. They had never divorced, staying together for Juhi, but eventually they started living separately after her father moved to India and never came back. He never bothered to contact either her mom or her, so communications fell apart. Young Juhi had been devastated, but Juhi now felt nothing of the traces of love in her heart for the father that had left her.

“Some of it.” Ben said, laying on the ground next to her. “At the end of my life though, I don’t think they liked me much.” She looked up at him at that. “Especially my older brother. He hated my guts. Thought I was selfish.”

Juhi wondered at that. She grew up wanting a sibling, specifically an older sibling who would always be there for her, so to see Ben’s relationship with his own was interesting.

“Did you ever want to find out what they think of you now?”

He shook his head. “Yeah, but how can I? I’m dead.”

“I can find out for you.” She offered, looking into his pale, ghostly blue eyes.

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She contacted Ben’s parents a few days later and visited them at their house. Ben had told her not to worry about it, but she went anyway. Besides, it was a good escape from doing what she had to do.

Ben’s mother, Sarah, was a pale, scrawny thing with short mousy brown hair that flopped dead down her shoulders, her eyes a light brown with no spark to be found. Jordan, Ben’s father, was tall and big next to Sarah, a tiredness in his face, with whitish blond hair stacked on his head. Although Ben had gotten Jordan’s coloring, Sarah looked so astoundingly like him that Juhi couldn’t stop staring at her.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” She spoke. It felt ironic to say it after having been on the receiving end of the same phrase for what seemed like so long.

Sarah shook her head. “Thank you. I’m surprised you haven’t heard.”

When his parents asked her how she had known Ben, she hesitated. Should she have said she was Ben’s friend in college? Instead, her curiosity won out, and she said that her mother and Ben had met each other in rehab, and she was amma’s daughter.

They looked at each other, surprised, and a new light filled their eyes.

“She was amazing.”

The word dropped like a coin through her stomach.

They went on to explain everything amma had done for Ben. She helped and talked to him in rehab, cooked Indian food for him, and called to check in every other day when she couldn’t come in. She encouraged Ben to talk more to his parents and brother, and she reached out to Sarah and Jordan after Ben had passed. She had taken care of him like she would a son.

Juhi’s stomach dropped lower and lower as she heard it all.

“How is she?” Jordan asked. Amma would come by sometimes, he said, but recently she had stopped.

“She passed away.”

They looked shocked, offering her their condolences, and a bitter smile spread over her face as she had accepted them. A strange feeling of helplessness took over her. That she was alien to these events that she was hearing and relaying. So she shifted the conversation away from amma and to what she actually came here to do.

They talked about Ben instead, and how he was like in college and high school. Rash, a little bit cocky, but a sweetheart who smiled his way through anything. Sarah spoke about his

death, saying that she missed him more than anything, but hoped he was in a better place now. How they were all in a more accepting state now. Juhi wondered how it could be so simple. Maybe it had *become* that simple after watching their son struggle with addiction for years.

The older brother, John, had married, and was with family right now. “He was the most affected by Ben’s death.” Jordan said. He mourned the most of all three of them, joining a Nar-Anon group near him to help him get through it.

When she went home later that day, Ben asked her where she had gone. She looked at him, and it felt like all of a sudden, she didn’t know anything about him at all, but at the same time she knew so much.

“To your parents’ house.”

He froze up. “I told you not to worry about it.” He muttered, frustrated. “What...did they say?” What had she told them?

She explained the conversation, skipping over the parts about amma. Juhi didn’t think she was ready to explain her feelings regarding that yet. Juhi didn’t think Ben deserved anything hurtful that she might accidentally end up saying.

Instead, she put her hand over and through Ben’s, the only semblance of comfort she could offer. Ben wept in silence.

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Over the course of a few weeks cleaning up more of the house, Ben had shared more and more about himself, and eventually she couldn’t help herself from asking the question anymore.

“How close were you with my mother?” She asked one day. Enough weeks had passed so that they had settled into their daily routine: where Juhi would go into the kitchen, whipping up

her dinner or microwaving her next frozen meal, while Ben would sit next to her on the counter. He would scare her by touching the flames of the stove with his bare hands, laughing a little as she yelled at him, before remembering that he was a ghost.

Ben assumed the same position on the counter next to her today, watching her as she averted her eyes from him and stared down at the chicken tikka masala meal from Trader Joes that she had just microwaved. The orange-yellow curry was entirely unlike how amma's chicken had been, a dark-reddish brown filled with all sorts of spices and smells that would have her running downstairs to try a piece before it was even off the stove yet. Now, she couldn't even replicate the recipe even if she tried.

She wondered if Ben had tasted amma's chicken curry before. What other curries had she made for Ben? Had she put less masala in case he couldn't take the heat? Maybe added some curd on the side?

Ben spoke then, snapping her out of her trance. "When everyone else had given up in my life, my family, my friends, she was the only one who seemed to always be there." He replied slowly and carefully, watching her reaction. "She thought I could change."

His ghostly paleness and yellow hair seemed alien to her as she looked up to him at that. A strange feeling churned through her chest. What was it? What was it?

Jealousy.

How come amma had thought Ben could change, and gave him so much, so much *leniency* to do so, while for her it had been one clean break and done? How come amma had treated Ben more like how one would treat their child than she had treated Juhi? How come Juhi had never gotten to taste her mother's chicken in the last four years, but Ben had?

She turned away, carrying her rip off chicken curry with her to the living room and plopping down on the sofa, turning on the TV.

“Hey. Are you okay?” Ben asked, concerned as he floated over to her. He seemed so sincere that she wanted to scream.

“No! If amma was so close to you, why couldn’t she, why couldn’t she be close to me too?” Her eyes burned. “Why couldn’t she have tried with me too?”

She must have been crying at that point because Ben looked flustered, shocked as he sat down next to her, and tried to wipe her tears with his hands. They kept going through her face though, and from what she could see from her blurry vision, he was frustrated by it.

“Don’t cry.” He said. “Why are you crying?” She cried harder at that, and he sighed sadly. “Your mother loved you, you know.”

She didn’t say anything at that, because how could she just believe him? As far as she knew, amma had never talked to Ben about Juhi at all. So she stayed quiet as Ben comforted her, afraid that if she said anything at all that her fears would be confirmed.

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When she finally mustered the courage to open the bangles her mother had worn when she died, she slipped them on. They were golden, thin, and bumpy with slight designs, the color diminished after years of wearing them. Amma had worn these every day, ever since Juhi was a baby. She would constantly be twisting them, especially when she didn’t agree with something Juhi’s father had said but stayed quiet in response.

Amma had also twisted these same bangles when she met Juhi’s first long-term serious relationship. Juhi had met Ryan when she had gone clubbing with Miranda in her junior year of

college, and they had hit it off. He was a political science student, with good humor and an attractive charm. A year into the relationship, she had finally introduced the two of them. She should have known it would have gone down horribly.

They didn't talk for a while after that, and her mother had lashed out onto her for the relationship. Juhi had lashed back. What did her mother expect, for her to get into a forced marriage, a forced relationship, like amma had herself?

Her mother gave her the ultimatum. *I'll leave you.* And Juhi had made a choice between restricting herself to her mother's wishes or the freedom that she finally been given a glimpse of.

At least she had Ryan, she thought. They moved in together after college, and she was content with the fact that someone had chosen her. She had truly loved him. But then, years of a relationship went down the drain when he cheated on her, after Juhi struggled to deal with the sudden loss of connection with her mother and not fitting into the mold amma had wanted for her and her relationships, and after Ryan struggled to understand her.

*"Why is it so difficult to be with you? Why does it take so much effort?"* He had asked.

She could understand where he was coming from, she supposed. He had never faced backlash for anything as a privileged man who grew up with a loving family, and the freedom to do anything he wanted. Before, Juhi couldn't even cut her hair without telling her mother.

He didn't have the constant need to look towards someone telling him if what he was doing was wrong or right. His self-worth and lovability didn't depend on his every little action.

It was her fault, she had surmised.

She told Ben this, and he had told her she was stupid. People struggled to understand his relationship with addiction too: why did he keep doing something that was so dangerous? Ben

admitted they weren't wrong, but instead of trying to truly understand and help, they gave up, and he didn't have the energy to make them stay.

"Besides." He frowned. "That's not an excuse to cheat on someone. Asshole."

That had made her feel better.

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When she came across her mother's diary, nothing could stop Juhi from trying to read it. But it was in Telugu, and her skill in reading Telugu was as good as a two year old, which meant basically nothing. She threw it across the living room, frustratedly, and Ben didn't even flinch as it hit the wall with a thud.

Then she got up and picked it up, smoothing it out, feeling so much hatred for herself that she had just done that. Instead, she combed through the book, looking for one of the only words she knew how to write in Telugu – *Juhi*. Her fingers traced the lines, watching as the entries, and her name, went from more frequent to less frequent. She read the last entry the best as she could, piecing it together a few hours later. The entry had been a few weeks before she died. Amma had contacted Juhi's father.

Something in her chest contracted as Juhi reread the entry again and again, making sure she had read it right. Her father? Why her father? Naana hadn't spoken to Juhi in a time longer than her own mother had.

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"You should call him." Ben said.

She shook her head. "There's no point."



He frowned. “No point? If you’re going to keep thinking about him, you might as well get some closure.”

She didn’t say anything, and turned away, folding close one of the boxes lids in the living room that she had been packing. Juhi was near to clearing out the house.

“Where’s the tape?”

“*Juhi.*”

“I’m not talking to him, okay?” She ground out, looking Ben in the face for the first time since he brought up the issue. “Why would I talk to someone who wants nothing to do with me?” Why would she want to do something that would only hurt her?

“Because it’s not for him, it’s for *you.*”

“We’re not talking about this.”

“Yes, we are.”

“No, we’re *not.* Or I will buy a cross and use it to ward you off.”

“...I’m pretty sure that’s for vampires, but okay.” He shook his head, moving on. “Why can’t you just tell me what’s wrong?” Juhi usually told him everything. *Did* tell him everything.

“I don’t feel like it, okay?” She stormed away, and he could hear her thuds going up the stairs. “Stop asking, and *do not* float in!”

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He floated in later anyway, sitting on the edge of her bed as she stared down at her mother’s diary. She had only made one page of progress other than the last entry. It was about her.

“Do you think I’m selfish?” She asked, staring at the page.

“A little bit.” He admitted. “You remind me of myself that way.” Attentive to their own needs and wants before anyone else’s.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I’m not sure. It’s usually used in a bad way, right? But sometimes, I think about it and see it as the only way to protect myself amongst a world full of hurt.”

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The day she had finally mustered up the courage to call her father was the day she had finished clearing out the house completely. Ben had sat right next to her. She typed in the number from her mother’s diary and pressed the green call button. The phone rang a few times, before someone else picked up on the other side, and her breath hitched.

“Hello?” A deep voice said. Ben motioned for her to go on.

“Is this N-naana?” She tried not to let the tremor seep into her voice, but it did anyway.

When he recognized her voice, she continued.

She asked him why amma had called him before she died and learnt that it was to tell him that she was dying. “She said I didn’t need to send her money anymore.”

Then she asked her father one more question.

“Why did you leave us?”

He quieted. “We wanted different things. I wanted to come back to India.” He went on to explain how he and amma had never loved each other.

*So, he was fine with just leaving me? Fine with leaving me and amma alone?* Juhi’s throat burned, her eyebrows scrunching as she fought to keep any annoying emotions from entering her voice.

“That didn’t mean you had to leave me.” She grounded out.

“Juhi... you left your own mother.”

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The call hadn’t ended well, as she had exploded in emotion at her father, telling him how maybe they would have never ended up in that position if her father had been there. She told him off for everything he had affected in her life, and all that he had missed. When the call ended, it was the first time she had felt like she had gotten everything about her father off her chest, and it was also the first time she had bawled that hard afterwards.

Maybe her mother had been in the same position as her all along. Maybe everyone left her too. Wasn’t Juhi horrible then? Truly horrible for leaving a person who only had her?

Ben comforted her from the side.

“It’s not your fault.” He said, looking at her with such determination that she couldn’t help but want to believe him.

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But even weeks after she had finished, she still dwindled in the house, trying to read her mother’s diary, and staring at the slip that listed her father’s number. When the agent came to discuss putting the house on the market, she shook her head, saying she was putting it off until further notice.

Ben stared at her with a strange look in her eye whenever she said that, but she would ignore him. She turned her attention to her mother’s diary and phone instead.

Then one day, as they sat in the living room together, Ben looked towards her.

He opened his mouth, then closed it. Then opened it. "I have something to tell you."

She flipped through her transcription of her mother's diary in the yellow composition notebook, asking him what it was.

He lifted his hand, and Juhi saw that she couldn't see it anymore. She stilled, freezing.

"I won't be around for much longer."

*No, no, no, no, no.*

"W-wait, why...? What happened?" The house still wasn't done. She hadn't closed it yet. Ben wasn't gone yet. Ben was still with her.

"Juhi, it's done." Ben looked towards the journal in her hand. "What are you trying to understand? What are you trying to find?" He said, frustration creeping into his tone. What was she trying to see in her mother's journal and the call with her father?

Her eyes watered, and she frowned. "I'm trying to understand if she loved me or not. I'm trying to find proof that in the end, my mother still loved me." She knew she was selfish. There was nothing more that she wanted than at least one person in her life to not leave her. "Ryan left me, my father left me, I have no friends except for Miranda who has her own family now, my mother's dead, and at the end of it all, I have you. You're the only one left. You said you couldn't leave the house! You can always be here for me! You can stay here with me! I won't leave either, I'll be with you!" She would switch jobs, do anything.

He shook his head. "I can't do that."

"Why not? Why not? Nothing is stopping you."

"I don't think I have any regrets anymore. Killing myself might be a perpetual regret, but it's over now. I cannot change it. I didn't talk to my family before I died, but you've helped me see that they're in a better place. And Juhi, I've been with *you*." He hesitated. "Yes, I have

regrets, but I've come to accept them. It's over. It's a relief, and I think everyone I knew feels that as well.

"Thank you Juhi. And I'm sorry."

Juhi cried, because she knew what that meant. And it wasn't fair.

"Your mom loved you Juhi." He went on. "She really loved you.

"She regretted not reaching out to you in the end." Ben didn't want to tell her first, scared it would do more hurt than good, but now it was out in the open. "All she thought about was you." When Ben had met her in real life, all she did was talk about how she had a daughter his age too. When Ben had died, and he could see Juhi's mother but Juhi's mother couldn't see him, all she did was stare at Juhi's photos. Every night, she would cry to sleep thinking about Juhi.

Her gut churned as he went on to relay every little way amma had thought of Juhi. How amma had always kept Juhi in her thoughts. A realization chilled her bones.

He explained how he didn't tell her much about amma because he hadn't trusted Juhi in the beginning, since he had only seen it from her mother's side the whole time.

"...I think I woke up here because I was meant to meet you."

"But now you're leaving."

"Even though I'm leaving, it doesn't mean I don't love you."

She sniffled. "You know, I was jealous of you. That you were so close to her while I wasn't."

"I know." He admitted.

"I love you too." The tears came back again.

"I know."

"...if you see her, could you tell her that even after everything, I still miss her?"

He nodded.

That night, they both wept in relief.