

# Skyler, *I wish to breathe another season*



by  
Azure Nidah

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# **Chapter 1**

## **The Smile People Once Mocked**

The realm where a human breathes, creates a ripple in the core of that soul. The constant shift of the season transforms that ripple to tranquility or waves. The season was summer then. That was one of the most brutal summers I ever witnessed. Eternity seemed short to wait for a single cloud shading a corner of the sun. The consequence was a canopy of pure blue sky. But to the ever changing human hearts was that spotless blue with only radiant white sun soothing or intimidating !!

I am Nova. Currently a college student. Every five days of a week attending class without skipping any is my regular routine. Though that is the expected routine for a student. The regular scenario of the students is to make plans during off periods or after classes, which includes hanging out at popular sites or bookstalls, eating street foods and so on. The small gaps between classes will fill the classroom with clamor. In my case, not being an active participant in their chit-chat, all left to do is just hearing their stories only. Certainly, I do enjoy this. However, hanging out with them is not in my pattern. Honestly, I enjoyed such moments most around my sister. As she went to a different city for work, I hardly get chances to interrupt her schedule. As a consequence, another pass-time was added to my chart. I often wander around on my own. Back at home, the stories of my class often become a way to chat with my mother.

Our college holds classes in the morning shift. There are some lab classes or extra classes that are held at noon. The latter sometimes feels too tiring to me. One Thursday, I had a lab class. It took longer to finish the task than the scheduled time. By the time the class ended it was afternoon. I failed to answer correctly. The gloomy mood was unbearable. Suddenly, the idea of visiting my school area crossed my mind. That area is both my favorite and nostalgic. If I was a witch I would turn back time.

I hurriedly caught the bus and got down at the nearest stoppage. There is a playground behind my school building. The appearance of that playground changed a bit. It was late in the afternoon by the time I reached there. The surroundings were like a group of students playing cricket, some children were riding bicycles, some children playing seesaws and slides while their parents were watching them and gossiping with their peers. There are some benches beside the slides. I slowly walked to an empty bench thoughtlessly. Sitting down on that bench I took a deep breath. The fragrance of summer air was blended with the flavor of freshly made popcorn and fried

snacks. The air one breathed in with dear memories for most days of their childhood can be quite calming. As I kept looking at those children, I kept reminiscing about my day when I was at their place. Back then I used to hang with friends and all students in the class were cohesive. Time surely changes everything.

With a pensive mind I kept staring at the surroundings. Suddenly my gaze met with a girl sitting on the bench at my right side. That girl smiled politely at me. I snapped back to reality. I could not recognize her. Is she somebody who knows me? Or, a school friend I cannot remember? Throughout my school life I was jocked for smiling when I met someone I knew. Though not all of them did that. Maybe she was one of the latter. But I had a tiny bit of confidence left to remember those few people. Unable to find any solution, I turned my face after returning an uncomfortable smile. Not to embarrass myself further, I stood up that instance and strode out of the playground. Undoubtedly it was disrespectful to ignore anyone like that. Instead what was I supposed to say? Do we know each other? That would be a rude choice if she was a friend. Sorry I cannot recall who you are. That was an option. The moment I started to get those points I already left the area.

The setting sun was scattering the final red rays on the darker blue sky when I reached home. My clumsy character always gets me in such situations. With wide open notebooks I tried to concentrate on my study. But that event kept distracting. I regretted not talking. That was the moment I realized I did not properly remember her face. I was annoyed with myself forgetting the notebooks in front. I left my room and found my mother just returning to the drawing room after doing her task to relax. She turned on the television. Our usual chat started. That was the moment I was able to calm myself and returned to focus on my study.

Days of the summer passed by. My routine was the usual with the drifting time. One day, we had some special events arranged in our campus. The classes ended sooner than expected. I was not much interested in that event and came out. I started to walk towards the bus stand. The glare of the sun was making it hard to walk the whole way. To take a break I sat on the bench under the large trees. While leaning back, a bunch of dangling green mangoes caught my sight. Those large green mangoes made me greedy to have at least one of them. However I am still on the road, not in my garden. I don't have a garden to begin with. The real adventure was to steal the green mangoes from the school yard, which was forbidden to climb on. Due to the early leave, if I would go to school I would be able to visit the school yard. The school had to be open then. Forgetting the break I ran to get on the bus. When I reached it was still class time and the yard was open. Visiting my school yard after so long, I felt so happy. The flower plants

in the yard had grown. The sight of the students with our school uniforms was very nostalgic. That mango tree at one corner of the yard is still in the same condition. A bunch of students were there. Some were trying to reach the tree while others were guarding if any teacher was coming. I pretended not to notice them to not interfere with the fun. All of them were primary section students. The higher section classes were still ongoing. I left the school arena, humming a children's song and came to the playground, behind the school. The sun was showering the land with harsh vertical light rays, resulting in a deserted playground. I skipped to the side of the benches. However, arriving there, I saw someone sitting there in that rough sunlight with a light shade from the nearby tree. Noticing me, she stood up wearing a familiar smile on her face and approached me. She was the girl I met that day.

I was greeted with a "Hello". With hesitation I replied to her greeting word and said, "I apologize. But I cannot recognize you? Are you a student here? Um, did we meet before?"

I first thought she might be a student here. On second thought, she seemed the same age as me. She might not be a school student then. She did not answer my question. It made me reconsider whether I should have said something else. It's hard to get a human's point of view. Their preferences are surely different. How can I know what the person on the other end is thinking? That was the reason I fled the other day ignoring the whole incident.

She broke the silence with an apology, adding to her statement, "A friend of mine used to be a student at this school. I am familiar with this place. Nice to meet you."

She skipped answering some of my questions. Since she was not a student at this school, I was sure enough that we were not acquainted. The reason was other than school, I had very few friends or acquaintances. I nodded slightly to reply pleasantly and confessed that I was a student there, so I visited that place often.

"Um. I did not introduce myself yet. I am Nova."

"It's Skyler." she said.

Skyler did not say any further about her, neither seemed interested. I also paused there. However we continued our conversation. The topics were not related to us in the slightest. Mostly like weather, that playground etc. The extent of the chats were also short like a constant shift of water ripples direction. After a few minutes of talking, I mentioned my time to return home. She nodded saying "See you next time."

With uncertainty in mind I smiled. She waved me bye with that same gesture of smile on her face. Even when I was leaving the playground she was looking my way, just the same way we

did back in school days while returning home. I was not courageous enough to ask her more questions. But today I saw her face properly and thought could it be that we met before. After searching through the mind diary pages I still could not find anything.

Childhood friends do hold a different feeling. As we grow up we tend to search for people whose thoughts match more with ours. Though it is not something soul truth. Back in school days we defined our friendship in a different way. In my circle almost everyone started to get along after a quarrel among us, not to mention the topics were way more childish than our age. That was a hilarious way though. As time passed we started to learn the world and judge the people. At that moment even though I wanted to befriend Skyler, my mind was clashing with joy, anxiety and some other feelings I cannot describe. I ended up deciding not to come in this area for some time.

A daily notebook or diary is proof of every fleeting moment. Sometimes it turns into a collection of only the special moments. The view of the cover page of that notebook eventually becomes like the doorbell of the room. When you do not visit it for a long time the bell ringing sound will make you picture some corners of the room without your consent. I had one like that. My dearest friends bought a set of notebooks with the same designed cover but different color. I had one of those. It had been two years since I opened the drawer I put it in. I often make drawings in another notebook. It is not something one will say artistic. However to me it is similar to that diary which is superfluous to others but quite indispensable for the author. That night I took my drawing notebook and sketched some random landscape. I had an urge to paint it, but the time started to run. I ended up making shades with pencils. The landscape was based on the vague memory of the place we went on a tour back at school. Writing the date at the bottom right corner, I closed the notebook, as if to close the list of allotted events for that day.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Words We Leave Unsaid**

Marching to the end of April the weather started to get warmer. On one holiday, I was at home. Away from the burning sun, it felt better. While relaxing after studies, handing me a list, my mother told me to buy those things. To do the chores I have to go out. So, what's the point of doing only one task when you have a lot of time in hand. It would take just 10 minutes, but I informed her that I would be back in an hour. Leaving the housing society, I crossed the road and started to stroll. Though it was hard to feel the wind inside the house, there was a light wind drifting from time to time. The light windy atmosphere went perfect with the heat of scorching summer.

There is a small rest area beside the wide footpath, primarily a place of evening gathering of all aged people of the surrounding societies. I bought a bottle of soft drink from the nearby store and found a place to sit under a tree. The summer noon streets on the holiday made the area feel deserted. The sun rays were coming through the gap of the leaves. When the wind was starting to blow it was more fascinating. Leaning against the tree, I closed my eyes to hear the playful collision of leaves. I felt a tap like a falling leaf on my shoulder. I slowly turned while hearing a known voice saying, “So, we meet again!”

“Skyler”, I said in awe.

Skyler chuckled, “How have you been?”

“Ah,fine.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Just lazing around.”

“Mind if I sit beside you?”

“Be my guest.”

She sat on the ground next to me. I started to look at the ground. I did not know what to say. We are not school friends to talk about routine or after school plans. To break the silence , Skyler mentioned the roughness of weather and some other casual topics. I kept nodding or agreeing to follow her conversation.

“The leaves are shading as if the sunlight is fragmented and so is the warmth.” At the change to a

softer tone as if urging me to keep up the conversation, I looked at her and found her staring at the ground with sunlights through the leaves.

With a smile I continued, “Yeah, it certainly is beautiful. The breeze is making fragmented sunbeams merge and then drift apart again—like spotlights on a dimly lit stage. You are the star, and your audience is all of nature, from a grain of sand in the stalls to the sky itself in the gallery.” The bright sunlight was making it difficult to gaze for a long time.

“So you can also talk for a long time. I thought you can only say ellipsis”, she giggled and said after bringing her palm to her cheek.

“Ah, haha. So what are you doing here, Skyler?”

Now that I think those were my first words with her I had earnestly.

“I live near here. Seems you also live around.”

I nodded. Declaring us neighbors, she hoped to meet often. We chatted for a while. All of it was small talk like hobbies, favorite dishes and so on. But all the questions were done by her and I was just answering.

I returned home. Upon seeing me empty handed I was scolded. As if a kid lost track of its task while getting a chance to play. It was actually for some guests who would visit that day. Seeing Skyler erased my sour mood to meet those guests for a moment. I hurried out again to return before they came.

On the following Saturday I was home. I studied in the morning as the final exam was coming up. Then I took a break. On my holidays I sometimes helped my mother with her work. With the flow of time that became a habit. As the temperature was too high, mother wanted to dry some fruits. I asked, “Mother, let me help you.”

“No, you don’t have to. Take a break.”

That is how my mother is always like. No matter how much work she has to do, she won’t admit it, even if she is tired. To help her, I always have to start it secretly and make some excuses to continue.

I just sneaked a chance and took the bowl when she was not noticing. I went to the balcony, placed a fresh sheet. Then I sat by the door of the balcony and started to arrange the fruit slices. At the time my fingers touched the floor, I sensed the hit from the burning concrete floor. Brushing it a bit longer would make one cherish the roof over the head. Lia, a higher secondary

school friend, once said that. Her real name was Liana. Back then I was pretty close to her. I used to hang out with her in a group with other girls. Reminiscing about them reminded me of the conversation with Skyler from the other day. From the day I met Skyler in the rest area, we often ran into each other there. By the time we got closer and the conversations turned longer and earnest. That day we were chatting about college studies. At one point I was not agreeing with her. It felt as if she was willingly sidetracking her view. I stopped talking and just nodded to agree. The talkative expression replaced a nostalgic gesture on her face. To my surprise she said, “ Seems like three years is not enough for human habits to change.”

I didn’t get what she meant. Maybe my blank stare made her to say, “ Remember? One day Lia and others were joking about how to make expressions in the drama they were supposed to play at the cultural event. You were joking as well. However, when they joked about their own performance, you seemed to feel a bit uncomfortable. Then you suddenly turned silent as if you were not a part of it.”

At a loss of words, I kept staring blankly. I recall the story of the drama. It was just a story of a group of students before the final exam of the higher secondary school. But I still don’t get why they named it ‘Rain of Dew’. Skyler continued, “ I told you I had a friend at your school. I used to meet her there. So occasionally I met her friends.”

Skyler didn’t dive into reminiscing anymore. And quickly directed to a bench which was no longer occupied to sit. She talked as if nothing unusual happened. I didn’t remember her. So I also closed that chapter pretending everything was normal.

I decorated all the fruit slices in the middle of my thoughts. I tried to revive every page of my higher secondary school life memory. Everything related to Lia. Still, my brain failed to find a single photo of Skyler. All those jumbled thoughts resulted in constant sighing. Turning back from the balcony, I realized my mother was watching me. If you see someone way too absent minded and have a regretful face what would you think is obvious. Thanks to Skyler for leaving me to describe another mystery to mother, whose reason I could not explain. Right then a house sparrow entered the balcony through the metal railing trying to approach the food. We both hurried to chase it away. It flew and sat on the edge of a broken branch. When mother went back inside I kept staring at that sparrow. I smiled at it gratefully for saving me and put a fruit slice near the railing secretly. As a shy bird it was supposed to fly. However it kept chirping while staring at me. I felt scorned. It seemed that the sparrow told me that I chased it away, which wouldn’t be erased from its mind with a minor atonement. In the same manner, mother might have thought that I was depressed with something rather indescribable. Seeing me pretending

different, she might have skirted around the issue. Was it the same with Skyler? I told her I could not recognise her in our first conversation. Maybe, seeing me indifferent after mentioning Lia, she felt overlooked. Lecturing me with a constant chirp it flew out of sight. Returning to the kitchen I tried to help mother with meal preparation. She directed me what to do but did not ask anything.

That night I again took my sketch book. Though house sparrows are a common figure in my life, I could not sketch them using my mind. Surfing the photos of them for hours, I got the confidence to sketch it myself. Ending the sketch, I left the room and silently went to the balcony. The lights of other houses were turned off. The half moon was creating a shadow of the railings on the floor. I sat on the floor. It was completely different compared to the morning. Suddenly I noticed that the fruit slice I placed near the railing was still there. However it was half dried and out of shape. Mocking the beautiful moonlight, it narrated how easily thoughtless deflection deteriorates. We often try to hide facts from the people we are around. Though it puts our mind at peace, it may cause the other side to take the tempest of mind. Maybe not just the other side, after a certain time it can also make you feel the burden of unsaid words. The silent night deepened with a lot of words chirping from the surrounding.

## **Chapter 3**

### **A Gift That Won't Rot**

In the middle of May my semester exams were held. During the preparation time, the time seems to run too fast to cover the syllabus. Still, why don't the exam weeks end at the same speed!! The funniest part is, we become more concerned and analyze the topics after answering in the exam paper than while studying. The fourth exam was English, a minor course in my department. My exam did not go well. Though I was positive about getting the passing score. After the exam ended, Joye, a classmate, called me. Our home is on the same route, we often return home together. She suggested, we go to the bus stand together.

After arriving at the stand, the bus was already waiting. There were still twenty minutes before departure. We started to talk about the exam. It seemed Joye's exam was also not to her expectation. Rather than feeling depressed, we started to laugh at it. Maybe, it is a bit consoling when I hear someone else's exam also did not go well, not in an envious way, but to calm myself. At that time, Maya arrived on the bus with Rose. Maya is in the same department as us, whereas Rose is from a different one. We all had the same subject test so our schedule matched. The three of them went to the nearest stall to buy some snacks. I didn't go with them. So, I got the duty to look after their belongings. The bus departed at the required time and the chattering sounds started to resonate the speedy flow of the wind.

That month was also about to end. At last, the semester final exams ended. It was 4.00 pm. All the faces leaving the exam hall seemed as if the summer tree leaves got the long awaited raindrops. At that time while going towards the bus, Joye told me that she and some other classmates were going to a cafe. They were discussing where to go. I saw a known face walking a bit of distance. It was Skyler. I was not very surprised, though. This area is a bit far from our residential area. However, to study in a renowned college, this area is closer to our home. I ran towards her. Upon greeting, Skyler returned a dazzling smile.

"What are you doing here? It feels like you are following me everywhere." I said jokingly.

Skyler folded her arms, with a cocking eyebrow said, "Why do I feel it's the opposite!"

We both laughed and right then Joye came towards us and said in a go, "We are going to the Mouno cafe. Want to join?"

Mouno cafe is close to our college. However I was unwilling to go with them as I was not that

close with everyone there and wanted to be with Skyler. I declined. As they were quite sure of my answer they did not object and set on their way. When I turned towards Skyler, she asked if it was okay not to go with them. I answered in the affirmative. We went to a field beside the bus stand. Our college sports field can also be seen from here. As it was late in the afternoon the field was full with people. We entered there and started to walk by the side to find a place to sit. Seeing me striding irregularly Skyler asked, “What are you doing?”

“Trying not to step on those grasses.”

Considering a field full of grasses this narrative may sound unreasonable. But she did not say anything, rather looked downward. There were Crabgrass flowers of light brown color. We walked a bit farther and sat on the ground. In summer, flowers in grasses are common. The place where we sat was also surrounded by different colors of small Mimosa flowers. Though individuals of different ages came, most of them seemed to be students. A group of students gathered a bit further from us, forming a circle. One of them was playing the guitar and singing. Some of them joined voices with him. The song was familiar to me. I was humming the lyrics. Suddenly I realized that Skyler was tapping her finger with the rhythm. However her rhythm was matching with my hum, not their song. Realizing I noticed, Skyler looked at me. Out of blue, she said, “You could join them. Why did you refuse?”

Maybe Skyler thought she was the reason I did not go with them. Averting the topic is the best choice for such moments. However, I didn’t want to recreate the same feeling I felt in front of that half rotten fruit slice basking in moon light. With that thought I replied that I usually do not like to join such gatherings.

“You are clearly enjoying those students singing in the group. You certainly like these. Mind if I ask the reason you are not joining them.”

How could I say that such questions were the reason itself. I do not like to talk about myself to others that much. Neither do I love to listen about themselves. Maybe I mostly hate to become a part of their gossip. No, not in the way of backbiting, just casual small talks. I did not know Skyler for long. Though she claimed to be a friend of Lia, I didn’t remember. Talking to someone as a friend is a terrifying task. You may not realize that you are even ready to share thoughts that the other party should not know or feel annoyed. Either way, you will suffer.

“If you don’t want to answer, it’s fine. I promise to respect your thoughts.”

I was not sure what to tell her. Even if you tell after thinking a lot, others will not necessarily get what you mean.

“I don’t want to hang out with them. It’s just like. . . How to put it? Um. . .”

“Seems like you like to talk and be a part of those crazy chats too. But you don’t like when the conversation relates to anyone’s life core. However when you are in a group of friends, talking about yourselves is a common fact.”

I was staring at Skyler. Her words are equally contradictory like my thoughts. A contradiction between ‘leave me alone’ and ‘let’s chat over a tea’. Still those were the exact words I felt. Back then I often joked or chatted with Lia. Does Skyler get my philosophy from then? I wondered. Since the exam ended, relaxing a bit won’t do much harm. I did not go with them, still I had someone with me.

“Skyler. There is a tea stall. Mind to join me for a cup of tea.”

She nodded. We went to the stall. I took my tea cup from the table after her and sat on the bench. The feelings of that moment are not easy to describe in words. A moment I long waited to live. It had been years, I was a fragment of such a moment with a friend. We talked about our favorite type of tea, which stalls’ tea tasted the best. I said the best tea stall was the one beside the school. Whereas Skyler declared the stall beside our society park to have the best tea. We laughed over those trivial arguments.

After leaving the tea stall, it was already evening. Since we lived in the same neighborhood, Skyler proposed the idea to return together. While walking towards the station Skyler suddenly stopped walking and crouched down. I asked if anything was wrong. Skyler did not look at me, rather was looking for something on the ground. Maybe she dropped something, I thought. At that point she extended her hand toward me, holding something in her hand. It was Cockspur grass. I took it and tried to figure out the meaning. There were so many vibrant mimosa flowers compared to that broken rough grass, why did she give it to me?

“You can place it inside your book pages. It is already dried and can be preserved.”

Certainly a Mimosa flower may dry with a fading color. It’s possible to get out of shape too. However, Cockspur will be the same as now. As that day I had a exam, I had my Calculus book with me. I placed it inside the book. Upon closing the book I found a mesmerized look on Skyler’s face.

“It’s getting late. Let’s go.” Hiding a smile I said and started to walk towards the stand.

We reached our required stoppage by 7.00 pm. Skyler turned to look at me and said, “Your exam ended today. How about hanging out sometimes?”

“Yup. Whenever you wish.”

“Then the day after tomorrow?”

“Are you free in the afternoon?”

“Yeah. See you then.”

Till that day every time I met Skyler was sudden. That was the first time we made a plan. I was happy. However, like other days I was not feeling that much excited. The tiring exam week made me reach my limit. All I was interested in was to have a break from studying and sleep without any worries. Reaching home, the break from study made my plans to sleep flicker. I chatted with my mother for a long time, watched pending movies and chatted online with my sister. Finally before returning to sleep, I arranged my books of that semester in one corner of the shelf, hoping not to encounter them for the time being.

## Chapter 4

### The Abandoned Mansion, a Different Universe

The last day of May of that year. That month felt quite long. Maybe the reason was the semester final exam. It was the third semester in my college. I met Skyler almost a month ago. That day was the first time we made a plan to hang out. How long had it been since I made such a plan, I wondered. I usually don't bother about choosing a dress, maybe as there is hardly such an event. After thinking a lot I could not choose any and picked a regular one. It was 3.55 pm when I reached the road where we were supposed to meet. I waited at our promised spot, near the tree where I met Skyler first in the park's rest area. After some time Skyler arrived.

"Hello. So where do you want to go?" said Skyler.

"I do not have any particular place in mind."

"Okay. Then I will decide. Follow me."

We started to walk by that road. We took turns and came quite far from the residential area. There was another park behind the front one and a road behind that park, attached to the residential area though a bit far. Behind the road there are rows of trees for miles, which is the end of this area. I don't know what type of area is on the other side. This road is known to all but people of this busy city have ignored it for long. We turned right by a mango tree. There were rows of trees. I never knew there would be a walkway. It seemed like a desire path with some wild grasses growing randomly. Undoubtedly, this path is not visited frequently anymore. After two to three minutes of walking the usual sight of tree rows was replaced by a two storeyed building. The concrete building had an off white paint, maybe not repainted in a long time. It had a flat roof over it. Overall, it seemed like a normal building, yet a wonder, who lived there. Skyler started to walk towards the house. Maybe Skyler knew the people living here. I followed her. From inside it seemed to be one family house, not apartments. We were like intruders. I tried to stop Skyler. She turned towards me, gesturing to follow her. There was no sign of any human in the drawing room. When we reached by the stair I asked Skyler, "Do you know someone living here?"

"It is abandoned. No one lives here anymore. Let's go to the roof."

I again started to follow Skyler. On the second floor there were four rooms. One of the doors was slightly open. The stairs from the second floor to the roof were not well lit. Upon opening

the door to the roof the whole floor became clearly visible.

Skyler wide opened the roof door. As she passed, it seemed more like she entered in her own universe. When I reached the last stair to the roof, looking to the sky from there seemed like a different universe. Though I have seen the sky from a lot higher places, it was different in beauty. There was a strong fragrance submerging the whole area. I looked around to discover a tree on the left. Following the direction I found that it was not a large tree, rather a part of a climbing vine. The leaves seemed familiar. There were many white flowers that bloomed in summer. Those were pure white with thin but curved petals.

“It’s jasmine.”

Hearing Skyler’s voice I bent to see where the plant was from. It was growing from a flower pot in the balcony of the second floor.

“Can a jasmine plant be this high?”

“They are a type of wild jasmine. If they get enough support to climb on, they can grow a lot.”

I looked at that flower pot again and asked, “Hey, do you know the people who lived here?”

Skyler shrugged. The strong yet sweet smell of jasmine was reciprocating with the mystery of the house. The trees around the house were a bit different than the trees by the road. Maybe there was a garden around the house. Maybe, the fence was hidden behind the untrimmed branches. I asked Skyler if it was okay to visit the rooms. Her response sounded more like to consider it as our own base.

“Ah! Skyler, doesn’t it feel like a secret base. Let’s explore it.”

“Yeah. As expected of a kindergartener.”

“Who?”

With a ignoring expression Skyler went towards the second floor. I first entered the room where that plant was. The room was almost empty. The things left were probably what was unneeded. There was some furniture covered with white sheets designed with old dust. In the balcony I saw the flower pot. It was a pottery with a floral pattern on it. One side of it was slightly cracked, ensuring it was not made by a professional. Those wild jasmines were star-shaped, like a vibrant white star had come to visit the forest green leaves.

Next to the room was the one with a slightly opened door. The room was filled with a different aura. Only two pieces of furniture were sitting in one corner, maybe a reading table and a bed,

and some cardboard boxes were arranged in a stack. Undoubtedly it was a child's room. The white painted wall had some doodles on it. After leaving that room, the other two rooms were opposite to it. Nothing else than some leftover furniture was there. But these two rooms were less dusty but mussy as less ventilated. Wandering around the mansion took a huge amount of time. Then I went to the first floor.

In the evening when the tour of the house ended, I remembered I was not alone. When I turned she was nowhere. I started to search for her. The long time abandoned mansion was looking horrific with the dim rays of setting sun entering through the ventilator. 'Come on. Don't make it more haunted Skyler.' I ran to every corner of the floor. Unable to find her I thought to check upstairs. Stepping on the old wooden stairs were making a creaking sound. I kept shouting her name while running and ended up on the roof. Skyler was standing there, the same direction where the jasmine plant was.

"Why would you come here leaving me alone in an unknown place?" I shouted unintentionally.

"Why? Are you scared?"

Skyler asked half turned towards me, still looking at the sky. The blizzard blue sky was roamed by fragments of deep peached clouds. After the long cloudless summer, finally the cloud felt like waving in an elegant manner. The one standing against it was devouring that grace. As if the cruel darkness of the first floor can be melted with that waning light, if someone dared to open the windows, even just a bit. As the evening light faded the sky shifted to a dark attire, with sparkly star patterns. Both of us kept looking at that shifting sky.

"It's almost an hour, Nova. How long are you going to stare at the sky?"

"I wish I could stare the whole night. Can't you see the countless stars?"

"How old are you truly? It certainly is beautiful, but it sounds like you are seeing them for the first time."

"Not the first time but after years."

I could hardly see her silhouette in the dark.

"You know Skyler, our gorgeous city is competing with the whole world. The sky is not something they wish to lose to. So they forced it to defeat. Even on a clear night you can hardly see six or seven stars..atmost. This sky is from a different universe."

If that glittering city is a polished gemstone, then a place just a small bit away from the city

was like an unpolished raw stone. Is a place far from human reach akin to the beauty of unseen crystals inside an unfound fossil? Again a silence was placed with the deep fragrance of those summer jasmine for a long time. However, every moment is fleeting. After another hour or a bit longer I had to bade that moment along with the place for that day.

Constant flow of light and dark is the only nature of life. That so-called flow of life could not tolerate the beauty I swallowed that night. When I returned home I found some pairs of shoes in front of our door. Undoubtedly, those are of some neighbours. Those patterns became so familiar that they instantly created the feeling of unwanted cracks on a thick ice rink.

## Chapter 5

### The Happy Living Room

The month of June was priming to enter the flow. The last hours of rough May seemed to be melting at the bidding moment. A chill wind was blowing, making the curtains dance. Despite trying, I could not sink my thoughts with them. The unwanted neighbors from earlier often visit our house. It is normal to visit each other's house at evening in a neighborhood. But I cannot adjust myself to their normalcy. What I hate most is their gossip topics, which have no regard for boundaries. The first thing they said to me after seeing me was, 'You're hanging out now after the exam? My goodness, it seems like you've started dating!' They burst out laughing without hesitation. If I were someone who regularly went out, it wouldn't even concern them. While swelling with anger I heard a hitting sound. It started raining for a bit. So the rough May did end with cool showers. Not to mention with hails. Finally I came out of my unsettling thoughts while rushing to collect pieces of hail. I collected a lot in my palm. The temperature of the folded palm made some to melt whereas some joined from the light pressure. The children of other houses were also making a ruckus to complete who collects more. My competitor was not home then. Still I had to take the advantage to show off my collection. I ran to the room showing my mother my collection and grabbing my phone to brag to my sister.

The next morning I went to our roof. Recently some rooms of one apartment were repaired, leaving a number of glasses unused. However the scenery was different now. The first one or two glasses assembled in a row was shattered. Some parts were of no use anymore. Back in secondary school I collected such broken glass pieces with Hina. With that same childlike mind I took a small still glossy piece of glass and shoved it in my pocket.

That noon I had a plan to hang out with Skyler. Since I had a little break before the class started we planned to meet every noon as both were free. When I reached there I found Skyler waving at me from the roof, as if it was her house I came to visit. I also ran toward her as if I had come to my friend's house. In a nutshell it really became our unannounced secret base. From the roof the first thing that caught my sight was that different sky. It had more white clouds scattered than yesterday evening. The wind was also strolling often. I quietly absorbed that beauty before returning to Skyler. "How have you been, Skyler?"

"Great. What's the matter? You generally don't ask such questions, except as an antiphon."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"You don't have the slightest manners to ask someone about their day until they do? What a rude child. Even a preschooler would do so." said Skyler with a smirk on her face.

I was getting so used to her mocking style that it felt more normal than her usual conversation. On a second thought she was right. I don't recall when I last asked anyone from my class how their days were willingly. The more you ask questions to others the longer you get to talk with them. That was a scary thing to begin with. Seeing me not respond to her mockery, rather dividing deeper thoughts, her smirk vanished with a soft still unnoticeable smile.

"Last evening after you returned home did you see the sky?"

See the sky? A moment worth making you create an image or scare without fear, will you care to stand before nature. Even recalling their hilarious lies made me shiver in anger. Before I could say anything, she said, "After you left yesterday, your beloved stars started to hide behind those small pieces of cloud which transfer grayish to black. The cloud gradually turned denser!"

"Then how about the hail afterward? I did not see the clouds forming. But when the hail started to fall, I ran to the corridor to collect the hail pieces. Those were small and still perfectly shaped. They were not too transparent, yet they reflected light. Aren't they beautiful? Ah! That reminds me, today I collected a piece of glass from our roof."

I shoved my hand in the pocket to get the piece out. Though the edges were rough, the center was so glossy. Against they sun the reflected rays too. While showing them to Skyler she said, "Is that so? Okay. Let's explore the house more. Yesterday we did not get to visit the whole house."

I immediately followed her. That day I basically wanted to explore the first floor. In broad daylight, it seemed more beautiful than the last day's horror mansion. The spider webs were hanging everywhere, The drawing room was quite big. The sofas were covered with white sheets in the center. The edges of the room also hold many covered furniture. For me it seemed more like a palace. I wonder who lived here!! There were two ways opposite to the entrance. We took the right one. It had a large kitchen. There were two other doors there. The rooms behind them were small but full of shelves. Returning to the drawing room we took the other way. It had a large designed door at the side . Other than that, only some chairs were left. When we raised the curtain the dark room enlightened. The side door was locked from inside. We opened it and the result made me freeze for a moment. The sunlight entered the room till a great height directly, causing the glasses of the chandelier to reflect on the light green wall. The reflections took rainbow shades. The prism shaped crystals moved as the wind entered the room. The rainbow fragments on the wall started to dance.

“It seems they are happy to see the light after a long time. We should keep this room open for a bit. Right, Nova?”

“Yeah. I don’t dare to close the door.”

Removing the covers from two chairs I offered her to sit. We sat there facing each other. Our sides were covered with the view of nature and the rainbow wall. We started to chat over the beauty of the room. Maybe it was the living room. “Hey Skyler! It looks like a living room, right?”

“Hmm.”

“I wonder how the evening was for the family living here. Did they gather here? Or, it is just a place of decoration.”

“I don’t know either. But, I believe it was not just for decoration.”

“Why?”

“We just visited the drawing room. It has a lot of furniture. Maybe there are a lot of decorations covered. But, no such chandelier. Only the living room is holding such a gorgeous piece. If the dust is cleared it would look more bright. Yet, if you want to confirm, you can ask the wall.”

“The wall?”

Skyler pointed to a side of the wall. The light green wall had a lot of scribbles. But not all were scribbles. Some were drawn with a steady hand. The wall was designed by some poured liquids behind a small table. Maybe a strain from a coffee or tea. Undoubtedly, the room was not silent back then.

“You are right. Glad that it was not left to show the world. I hope things are still like this wherever in the universe they are!!”

“... Same here.”

“Let’s go outside”

I ran to the field outside. There was a garden. Different types of flower trees were planted. However the untrimmed tree branches have covered the flowers. Good thing, else the small flower plants could hurt from hail. That reminded me of the jasmine tree on the second floor, so I asked Skyler to follow and went to the balcony. As I feared, it was hit by yesterday’s hail. Though it was not in too bad shape, some branches were totally broken.

“Skyler, Skyler. Look here!!”

“Want to know what your different sky was like after you left?” After a pause she continued, “Those dense clouds were darker than that in your city clouds. When the first few raindrops were too beautiful after a long dry summer. However as the hails started to shower, it was not possible to look at the sky. Some of those hail pieces were considered as a natural beauty. But the larger pieces scared your beloved jasmine plant, the glass on the roof, some people on the road back then and many more.”

“Then hail is not that beautiful?”

“That is not something we can explicitly decide? For those who are harmed by them won’t find it beautiful. But since you did, there surely is some beauty that you found.”

I did not get what made her share such philosophy. But, it made me think that if I was the star, the clouds were my facade to hide my disgust to those neighbors, then hail will be the long time gathered anger. I cannot decide whether I would see the beauty or horror of the hail. Staring at the torn jasmine flowers I kept to collect them. I wonder if I ever get to conclude such thoughts.

# **Chapter 6**

## **Red Carpet of Belief**

The torn petals of the jasmine had long lost the fragrance. Maybe they fought with the hail to keep surviving. The fragrance was not the only thing it lost in the battle. The soft white smooth texture was scared with brown scratches, drying the warmth. However, the remaining tenderness of those petals didn't forget to smile. As if they have found the truth worth smiling at the beading moment. Leaving the torn petals in the pot I went back to the garden.

“You took too long to return. Want to take a look around?”

I nodded in affirmative. The garden was huge. There were so many trees, some of whose names were unknown to me. Some flower plants seemed to be brought from overseas, which could survive the tropical weather. The long unattended trees were decorated in order to their heights. Some of them broke the order. We took another pathway and went deeper in the garden. In one turn a flamboyant tree caught our eyes. It was time for them to bloom. That tree was not still covered in lots of flowers. We continued our tour further. The sun started to go in a darker way too. Skyler suggested returning to the mansion. Just then, we found some vibrant red or orange flowers scattered in the pathway. Some dried, some fresh, spreading five petals around. Exactly, above our head we found another flamboyant tree branch covered with red petals. The wind scattered the fallen petals in a large area. Most of the petals were separated from the sepal. A fully connected flower fell in front of us. I collected that. And found three more like that. We stood there till the evening and returned to the living room.

“Luckily, the flamboyant trees are tall. Else maybe they would lose the calming flame like beauty in a blink of an eye.”

“Why?”

“You think people admire them for their beauty. Maybe some do. But most of them just use it as showing off. Every natural beauty is a strong weapon to compete with each other.”

“What about you, Nova?”

“Haha. For the flowers I don't want them to be torn. But I cannot guarantee for other things.”

A moment of silence made place between us before Skyler said, “Hey, why do some flowers fall even when they are not dried out?”

“Maybe to get rid of the pain humans cause while tearing them.”

“Or maybe to be a small gift to those who do not scar them.”

If what Skyler said was true, then how beautiful would it be? I wonder. But I knew it was okay to take the collected flamboyant flower. We engaged in fireside philosophy for hours. The sky again took a dark attire. We needed to return home. We needed to close the living room door then. There was no reflection on the wall by then. I left two flowers on the table and closed the door. If beyond human imagination there exists a world, how will it be? Maybe that living room still had a lot of small living organisms beyond our vision or we did not notice the small yet beautiful bugs making the room their own home. How did that darkness feel to them? Could it be, those bright flamboyant petals seemed as a small flame to them?

Time rolled. The harsh summer had more rainy days then. Though it was not the rainy season yet, summer was about to end. My vacation was also about to end. From the next day I would have to return to the regular routine. I wished to enjoy the last vacation day to the fullest. However, I wasted the whole morning lazing around. To reach my goal I left home before noon to take a tour around the neighborhood. By noon, we met at our secret base. The whole mansion was already a familiar haven. The sky turned cloudy. We remain inside the house. Our favourite gossiping spot was the roof, second floor room with the flower pot or the living room. That day we were playing in the second floor room. It got the name jasmine room by the time. There were some board games by the table. Since most of it needed more than two people, we just made our own rules to play. In the afternoon, we decided to take a long visit in the garden. The cloudy sky added a different vibe to our regular path. However we didn't dare to reach the end of the woods by then. We didn't even have the clue where it ended. That day we went a bit further and it started drizzling. We decided to return to the mansion.

“Let's take a different route.” Skyler suggested.

All we needed to do was to walk in one direction, so a different route was a good idea. The wind made the branches dance at its own pace. Reaching near the mansion, red petals were scattered on the path. Those flamboyant flowers bloomed. Some petals also landed to grab our attention. Racing till the living room, we tried to skip the heavy shower. The heavy shower caused some jasmine flowers to fall in a spellbinding manner. As if, white dressed dancers were stepping on a stair of raindrops with a grace of spin, landing softly on one foot, folding the other behind, and sitting on the ground. The pure white fabric met the earth, medaled with delicate dark brown patterns made by the mud. Such a performance from nature for quite a long was a blessing. A blessing that we humans oversee among the rush of life. Time danced at the same

pace, gradually brightening the stage in hues as afternoon turned into evening. The living room did not seem lonesome anymore.

“Hey Skyler, it was beautiful. We are lucky to return at the perfect time.”

“Nature’s beauty is not so scarce in number that catching a glimpse feels like luck. You just need a belief to see it.”

“A belief to see them??”

“Why are they so beautiful to you?”

Learning my thoughts of the white dressed dances, she said: “That is belief. What else can you call it? Everyday there are many falling petals or leaves out there. Why did you not feel them beautiful? Maybe you did not call that belief as they are piled under your other thoughts!”

Breaking the silence, she continued. “ Hey Nova, you seem rather cool now. How about searching for the belief a bit more. Hmm, how about if you were one of those dance performers, what would you ask of nature after such a graceful performance.”

I thought a little. It would be better if I could walk in the beauty myself. What else of the beauty I saw then? A garden under a cloudy sky, the turning point grasses of the pathway, the flamboyant tree. Ah! The flamboyant tree.

“Skyler! I think I get it a bit. But there is a thing out there which is too beautiful. It stopped raining just now. Let’s go.”

Closing the door we hurried to the field behind the society, by the road of the entrance of this mansion. The setting sun ray refracted creating an orange canvas painted with fine details. Reaching near the footpath by the field, I found the beauty I found once through my belief. There were less people, as rain just stopped.

“I still don’t get what belief you meant. However, please walk on the red carpet on your way home.”

There were a row of three or four flamboyant trees. At the end of the summer they remain full of flamboyant petals scattered on the whole road. However during rain a lot of petal falls, embracing the wet footpath. As if they spread a red carpet for you. The sequenced flamboyant tree makes it a longer path. Enchanted by the view, she agreed to accept my belief.

“So, how did you find them?”

“I found it here way later. Though I took this path for a long time. I first found this beauty on my

way to college. When I miss the bus, I have to walk an extra way. In the morning the path is less crowded. On such a morning, it just stopped raining. A lot of petals, even some flowers were sticking to the road. All the petals were perfectly in shape and color as there were fewer footsteps. You know some flowers just dropped in front of me. I always thought the petals of flamboyant trees were lightly attached. For the first time then I took a whole flower and found how strong they were.”

I could clearly hear a sigh, mumbling something like, “Seems like someone finds nature beautiful, only with lesser people.” Though the sigh immediately followed by laughter.

My vacation ended with an orange painted canvas which had a painting of a red petaled carpet, walked on by two friends on their way home.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Being Carefree**

The occasional rain became a regular visitor, announcing the arrival of freshness, the rainy season. The environment took a grayish hue. The dormant souls revived, like tree leaves in the rain. My new semester began. What changed in my college life was just notebooks, the classroom and subjects. The everyday scene was still constant. This season has always been my second favourite. I wandered around more often than other seasons. Our residential area is totally a layer design of concrete. Finding a place with soil is a fairy tale. However when we were in elementary school there were many places with visible soils. The best fragrance of the rainy season is always wet soil. So, my college or school areas and the parks were the only place to devour that heavenly fragrance.

One noon, while the rain took a little break, I went to the park near the mansion. The remaining flamboyant petals seemed to lose the bright shades. The white throated fantail was calling with a sweet clicking sound. At times it was placed in a rhythm to create a song. This park was visited by fewer people than the front one. At such times it seemed like a ghost park. Even though some people come here, hardly there is a scale change during gossip, no cotton candy or balloon sellers, no group of cricket or football players. In a word, most people who come here are those who are not a fan of or need a break from the bustling beauty. Undoubtedly, Skyler was a regular visitor. Other than the holiday, we hardly went to the mansion. So, the park became a place to suddenly run into each other. With a ‘It’s been a while,’ we started to chat. All our chats were often a world of maybe, what if, I wish, it seems to be. Skyler was a soul believer of belief while I struggled to distinct belief and philosophy. To add dynamics to our conversation a white throat fantail flew from a branch and landed before us. It kept searching for the food among the raindrop soaked grasses. Ignoring the human figure around, it jumped from here to there and started to spread its tail. Around the house their fan shaped tails are hard to see. They skip human eyes too fast.

“Wow!” I whispered.

With the same whispering tone Skyler asked what was so beautiful.

“I have never seen them make fan tails. Though they spread the tail just for a short time.”

“They make fan shapes for a reason. Basically they use this technique to catch the insects. So they just need a short time to startle the insects and catch them.” She said with the same whispering

tone.

“I see. Ah! It flew away.”

“I know a silly girl, who does not know the birds may sense her existence, even if she whispers.”

“What’s the point of still whispering now.”

Skyler chuckled like a child. Another long shower made us take shelter in one corner of the park. When the cloud decided to take another break a wind extended a hand to cradle them. Among those busy gray clouds, there was a carefree cloud, painted with a white touch. Wind refused to help such a carefree one, making it move slower while facing the sun. The overlooked cloud was blessed with the sunlight to pass creating a glowing tone among the gloom. Admiring its kind, the carefree still blessed cloud chose the abandoned park to share the glow. Being spelled the park became a place with bright light. What made it heavenly was the brightness among the gray world.

“Being able to be carefree is a blessing,right?”

“Depends on how you describe it.”

“When you don’t care for anything. Isn’t that a common definition?”

“Anything?”

“I mean everything.”

“No, Nova. That’s more like being a fool. Being carefree can only define being free from worry.”

“Haha. That’s what I said.”

“Is that so?”

Averting eyes she walked through the wet grass. Her tone was enough to get the disappointment. It was hard for me to get the difference. The light among the gray world is not that uncommon. But to find the sudden visit of a fragment of a bright world among the cloudy ones, one must need the belief to get this moment. The sky gradually took a lot of light gray clouds. The sun was about to set. The light clouds were not ungrateful to the blessing of the sun, they returned the favour by refracting the sun-rays. They tried to return them a unique gift, changing the all season orange sunset to pink or purple one. So, the rainy season sunset turned either dark or a charming pink one. The shade fainted, creating a dark canvas. The rain seemed to take a break for a bit longer. My conversation with Skyler was also on a pause. However, the hanging out for that day could not be ended without a proper ‘goodbye’. Pronouncing the hope to meet again

soon, I turned and walked. Just crossing three steps from the benches felt like a long area. A calm yet with a hint of disappointment touched voice talking from the background. I did not dare to turn, remaining standing in the middle of the grass.

“Not caring about anything and not worrying is very different. Considering the extent you talk willingly, I might be breaking the limit. But, you bind your belief based on human made definitions. From birth till death, life doesn’t have a single moment that has a proper definition. Don’t blindly absurd the surroundings. Be like the star that shines alone without worry of its own existence.”

I tilted my head back, gazing toward the sky, parallel to the earth, as if reaching for an unseen realm above. Yeah the whole sky in my visual reach, had only one star shining. It was so tiny that I had to stare to find it. What made it easy to find that star was not the glow, but the constant blinking. I gazed at the night sky with that star which was hiding behind the clouds and again peeping. The wind flew stroking my face, the grass danced with the wind stroking my feet with slightly cold tips. I still wonder which one I can gaze longer at, that tiny still blinking star or the me standing in the middle of that flow.

## **Chapter 8**

### **People of the Arrogant City**

A marble placed on a rippled falling gradient was given a slight push to go. Its velocity increased as the beginning was quite smooth. Suddenly that tiny marble unable to foresee the falling gradient encounters a small rock. Even though the marble was scarred, the increasing speed made it a bit arrogant. It kept rolling and met the thrill of jumping through a higher rock for the first time. That's how its journey began. When there were more rocks, the speed decreased, not ended. So is life. When the journey starts until the end it is going to roll. But in the meantime whether the soul responsible to carry that life will be able to roll is a different story.

The rainy days are called gloomy. I never found any reason why. Back that rainy season my life was fine. Other than class, I hardly had to deal with other people, as all preferred to remain inside unless necessary. The day rolled at a faster pace. On such a day while returning from college I missed the bus. I took another bus of a different route which had a stoppage a bit far from my destination. After getting off the bus and stepping on the footpath, rain greeted me. Unfolding the umbrella, I regained my presence in the bustling city. Two lines of marching people were passing in two different directions. The spreaded umbrellas were also moving with the same rhythm. It was almost a game of moving the umbrella up and down, not to clash with others. If you fail, the umbrella life will be reduced. The children wore raincoats without a care for the game, splashing water with and on their school shoes. I wished to warn them about the aftermath by parents or sports teachers. But those were good days, way better than the later ones. A slight change of concentration made me lose my umbrella game. I ran from the race and stood under one bus stand shade. After a long time, I got to see the journey of people, always moving, a small break and either you are out of line or way behind. A chill ran down through my spine thinking I was and am a part of the constant movement. Always walking to reach the destination without looking at other people's faces made me forget that reality for a long time. Gazing at the flow in a fixed direction would make anyone feel it. An unknown feeling made my heartbeat unsteady. The rain speeded up, dropped on the tin shade of the stand. It rained so heavily that even the rain on the thin plastic sheet of umbrella competed with the chaos of the city. The city was lost to nature at that time. Even the loud car horns were missing. With the excitement to share Skyler the winner's name, I unfolded the umbrella again, ignoring the clashes, I ran to the park behind the area. Unable to find her, I changed my destination to the mansion. The trees were filtering the flow of raindrops. The shower became lighter. When I reached the entrance, it

was drizzling. The metal shade over the gate was creating sound resonance. The rhythmic ‘trip trip’ sound in the deserted area ensured the existence of life. My arrogance of the winning heavy shower was smashed by the sweet rhythm. The city could not devour the heavy shower, but it devoured the dancing water drops resonance.

I went inside, carefully not to slip on the mud. Leaving the muddy shoes on the entrance I searched for Skyler and found her sitting outside the living room. The girl was noting every soft drop of the drizzle, as if she cannot miss to appreciate even one. I silently approached her, knelt down and whispered her a greeting. In return I just got a tilt to receive my greetings and no change in gesture or stare. I followed her way. The wood stairs connecting the living room to the garden started to hide under the rain water. A brownish red millipede was moving slowly over the stairs. I poked it with the finger tip and it hid making a coin like shape. Taking it in the palm, I felt the hard shell moving a bit and coiling again when poked. The dreamy girl beside me left her job to note the rain and stared at my stupidity. She ordered me not to disturb the tiny creature, “Leave it. After all, the rainy season is their most favourite.”

“Ah, ok.” Leaving the millipede on the stairs we saw it reforming the line shape and walked with its pace. “Wait. Here must be centipedes and earthworms. Be careful.”

“Ahaha. You play with millipedes, but are afraid of centipedes and earthworms.”

“Their names are scarier than the real one. Back in primary school during rainy days, our classmates would make weird tales about them. The excitement of the children made it worse. To make it a slightly scarier they would add to the real story. In the end earthworms remained beneficial for soil. However, even small centipedes were supposed to be able to kill humans in one bite.”

Skyler tried her best to hold the laughter, asking, “Were you one of the story tellers or believers?”

“Bo..both.”

A giggle thoroughly turned into laughter, surprising both clouds and rain to pause. The sky turned bright. There really were centipedes and Skyler did not leave the chance to scare me. The bright sky took us back to our school days. Those days were totally different.

The water height around the mansion was quite good for playing. Just like Nova in primary school, I took the notebook out, tore the last two pages. We made our paper boat, placing it on the water we pushed it just like that marble. The wind accompanied it to start the journey. The paper boats swayed back and forth. At a point we lost sight of them. They may not be able to go too far. But the probability to go a long way is not totally zero. The clouds might be keeping

track of them as far as they could. The clouds did not shed tears and cheered them to travel far. Did they also know the farewell without tears was easier for the one taking the challenge?

# **Chapter 9**

## **Unique View**

The soil soaked in rain collects the rain water. Those water drops drift through the soft soil particle, resting in a deep down layer of the earth. When the season ends, the world seems to dry out. They pity the soil's loneliness. How shallow are their thoughts, that they overlook the love the soil holds deep within, shared by the rain. Maybe, the soil laughs looking at the sky above wondering, 'They don't care how I feel or what truly my situation is, do they?' Maybe the sky laughs and calls it 'Lucky'.

The rainy season stayed for a long time that year. For one week there was non-stop music of rain showers. As the low-pressure spell in the bay began to fade, the relentless rain paused. The sky was still grayish, but the clouds cried for a long time turning the black pain a bit lighter. Maybe that was the bidding moment of the season. The classes were in full motion by that time. We had an extra holiday before the weekend. As the first class test of that semester ended just before the three day vacation the class was planning a short tour. Due to the rainy season, the tourist spots were offering a great discount. A perfect chance for students. I was not particularly interested. However, since it was a national holiday, I could hang out with Skyler.

The evening before the holidays we met at the mansion. I was not quite a people's person. How was Skyler? I was able to find her in the park or the mansion alone almost every time. Among our chats of philosophy and belief, suddenly our class tour took place. Skyler did not bother to ask me whether I was going. With confidence that I am not going, she suggested we take a short trip, just for a day.

"A trip to take in one day?"

"I mean more like a hangout than a trip."

"Then how about Stobdho pond. It is in the neighboring city. If we start early in the morning we might reach in one and a half hours. We can return by the afternoon. In that case, with traffic jams, we will likely reach here by evening or early night."

"Sounds good. But the bus will only go till the entrance of that city. It will be almost forty five minutes walk from there."

"Won't that be better? After walking about fifteen minutes on the main road, we will take turns, right? Those areas are less chaotic."

“Ok. Then that is the plan.”

The night passed with rain only once. Next morning we met at the bus stand by eight in the morning. The bus departed. The bus was quite empty. As that was a holiday, regular morning struggles of school and office going people were absent. One group of friends was easily spotted due to their lively conversation mixed with the stories of the classroom. The bus moved smoothly before facing a long traffic line at a signal. It was almost the end of our city. No wonder many people were going home or for a mini tour as most of the long route buses were full. It was drizzling. One passenger stepped down from the bus in the rain and smiled as if he was absorbing the raindrop. His other friends started to join him, even some passengers other than their group joined them. Someone started to sing a traditional song about that season. The passengers of all ages joined in their own rhythm. That moment was a profound memory to keep stored in an unwritten diary. When the signal turned green the bus driver notified everyone to hop on, with a cheerful tone. A roll of giggle competed with the footsteps. The rest of the way it seemed more like a reserved bus for a tour. I was sure those students were quite capable of living the moment. They did not choose any song not suitable in the crowd, neither made the heartfelt beauty, a fragment of cell phone screens. We reached the neighboring city and walked by the chaotic area. After some time when we turned gradually leaving the main road the rain stopped.

“Hey, Nova. How was the bus journey for you?”

“It was like the study tours we had back in school.”

“Don’t you have any memories to relate after school, sweetie?”

“Ahaha.”

“Why didn’t you join them? It was not like anyone knew you there or was about to ask anything you don’t want to talk about. It was just a casual chat, like a group of strangers with every member present there singing, sharing snacks or so?”

“It’s not casual at all.”

“Okay. How about rain? Why can you not touch a single raindrop even when it is just drizzling?”

“How come you didn’t join but asking me?”

“Oh! No. It is not like I never walk in the rain or always carry an umbrella.”

“Then, have you ever felt the weird stares? Like you were just walking in the rain and people taking shelter under any shade or having an umbrella to look at you as if you are not normal.”

Skyler listened to my lines looking at me without any expression. She ordered me to hurry and started to walk faster. I had no choice but to follow her. Walking a bit longer the area was completely different from the main road of the city. It was a closure to the natural beauty of the rural area. Skyler stopped by a large field. The roads were higher than the surrounding area. The sky took on light gray attire. The field was large with trees growing here and there. Holiday brought the children back to the lonely morning field. The field had many companies divided in groups. A group playing football, another playing tag and more. My friend took two steps and slipped the slope confidently. It drizzled again. Skyler spread her hands upward, then, spreading her arms to both sides, she twirled as the rain drops agreed to add a sparkle to her graceful move.

“What are you standing there for? You can join.”

“I am fine here.”

“What’s the point of standing with an umbrella while it is drizzling? Look, all those children are still playing. Come here. You love rain, right?”

I could see mockery in her tone rather than inspiration. Walking the slope carefully, I lowered my voice, “You think those children around you will take it as normal. I tried to walk in the drizzle before. I don’t wish to try again. Moreover, those children live in an area closer to nature, different from the main city. They do hate city people, as city people are arrogant and always show off.”

“Who told you about them?”

“It’s given. If I was in their place, I would do the same. We should go.”

“When did I ask what you would do? I asked who told you those things.”

In her calm tone there was disgust. The wind turned furious, making the umbrella lose its balance. I closed the umbrella and walked into the field. The scenery before me was the wet grass covering the field at that part, pressed against a pair of black sandals, the water raising their level and creating some barely noticeable footprints. However, what I could feel was a lot of stares, as if something unsightly had entered their way. A feeling I hated so much that even walking while looking downward did not resolve the uneasy stares. All of a sudden, a small bare foot entered the scene.

“Sister, are you here on a trip?” asked a girl, maybe in secondary school.

“Y..Yeah.”

“You are enjoying the rain? Why don’t you come play with us?”

“No. It’s fine.”

Wrapping her elbows around my hand, she pulled me slightly, requesting to join them. A group of girls and boys came forward and some remained at their places. Only option left was to agree with them. A scream with ‘Yay’ echoed throughout the world beneath the sky. Through a bargain, the tag game was the winner. How could I say to those happy faces that, while playing tag in the mud, slipping is obvious. However they could just sneak into their home skipping parents’ eyes to change all the mud painted cloths. What about me? The large participant made the ‘Odd one out’ selecting process to choose the chaser too lengthy. Luckily I was saved in the first selection. The game started. The image of the running children, shouting for the chaser, formed an image on the brown iris that was unable to capture the one person running at her real pace, shouting like the other children to her heart’s content. The tag game was followed by flower flick, red light green light, football without a goal post. The sun was peeking from time to time, unable to hold the excitement to see the craziness of lives. The hands on my wrist watch continued to play happily, changing indices after indices. There was a small tin shade grocery shop. I bought some packets of potato chips and two packets of sliced cakes. I knew I could not afford enough snacks for all of us. But the children didn’t care; they were over the moon sharing the chips. One took the initiative to break one slice of cake into smaller pieces and shared with everyone. There were different stares in the children’s eyes. Some were friendly, easily bringing up different topics; some with a constant smile on the face while the mysterious glance in the eye; some standing in the distance the whole time still a kind expression; some without any expression but a mix of harsh and honest tone in the speech. In a word each of them had their unique gesture, tone, behaviour. None hold hatred or mockery for the uninvited guest. Like before I failed to take the image of only one person’s unique view. However a girl twirling, running, humming this whole time under the soft drizzle drops was sitting at a corner reflecting the small picnic in the mud in her soft brown iris.

The noon call of prayer combined with the stories of the children. While we bade each other they invited me for the next time. A bidding memory took place in my unwritten notebook, filled only with genuine smiles—no forced grins, no uncontrollable tears. The asphalt road led us to the pond. The pond and the surrounding areas were calm as if there was only slight motion reflecting its name. The presence of humans was lesser than other spots.

“It turned into a great trip day. Thanks, Skyler.”

“Hmm?”

“You know back in those days in one English lesson class only one of our group bought the exercise book. To be honest we did that every day to get a chance to chat. One day, Aria had caramel candy. But it was hard to slice and she wished to share it. The mission to break the candy began. We could not do it in front of the teacher so Aria took it on the desk and tried to break it with a pen. Another of us snatched it trying to break it with a water bottle. This continued making tiny crushed pieces of the candy. It sounds plain and stupid to others. However, that was a great moment, you know.”

“Hmm. How about today’s moment?”

“Thanks for sending me there. I tried to walk in the drizzle before. But as people who don’t have umbrellas mostly take shelter under any shade , I seemed weird. Those people glared or mocked me. I could not regain the courage to repeat it again. My thoughts about those children were biased. I apologize I should not have judged them based on my own thoughts.”

“Your thoughts are still biased.”

“No. I promise I will never talk about them in that way. After all, they are not like we city people.”

“Don’t you see that you are still making assumptions? When you spot one person in the city street walking in the rain how do you feel?”

“Lucky. No one cares how you are doing means you are lucky.”

“I wish to hold a mirror in front of you now. The smile on the face of a complete stranger watching the person walking in the rain is not humiliating. It is the smile of that person who admires happiness. Last time you walked in rain those who starred cannot be all mocking or disgusted. Every person has their own unique views. You don’t need to get them all. However they either admire or don’t care about it. Toss those strange feelings aside. Follow your own view.”

Long ago I believed that I needed to cherish my wishes. However, back then I was always with my friends group. They were with me to go out in the rain, walk on mud without slipping, walk through the water logged area and many other crazy ideas. We either participated in those tasks together or at least inspired the one who wished to do it, without caring about the people around. Now that I walk around alone, doing anything childish is not considered as a small happiness rather a lack of common sense. It’s not like those people were absent back then. Some people show a smirk while some through a glare. But, beside those few people, I missed those lot of them who smiled happily, wished me good luck and so on. Maybe I could find that little hope to

not care about those few and find myself because Skyler was there.

It rained from time to time. The raindrops falling in the pond water created a different rhythm than the land. There were many trees growing near the pond. Some trees scattered here and there had vibrant flowers loaded. The bright orange or yellow centered burflowers hold the proof of the rainy season's presence till the very end. As if they are saying in unison, 'Let the people say the rainy season is monotonous. We are here to announce the real you. Keep dripping holding your unique view.'

## **Chapter 10**

### **Things That Cannot be Compared**

Seasons have their own pace to walk. If they wish they can stay longer. If they are bored they walk away. Then why can't people choose the moment they wish to live longer? Every fleeting moment keeps a box of mystery for the whispering beyond to uncover. In a seamless action, the rainy season left a box for the veiled autumn. Autumn opened the treasure sharing the rain with the earth, keeping other delicate mysteries in its own mystery box.

That year the autumn rain chose to stay longer like the monsoon. Every day, I leaned against the back of the bus seat, watching the raindrops dance. I found a mystery in autumn. The sky could design the stage in any shade it wished. The clouds shifted between black and white—sometimes, even a black cloud wore a golden sunlight crown. The rain noted the trick to come and go in a moment. It sometimes rained in a row that seemed light from the bus window, but too heavy in reality.

The weekend visit to the secret base placed on the to-do list. The noon was an indoor tournament time for us. On such a noon a sharp chirp caught our attention. We rushed to the wooden balcony door. A vibrant blueish small bird sipped from the white delicate jasmine flower cup, spreading its layered wing while flying. The unique style made it easily recognisable. The beautiful sunbird was interrupted by curious soul peeking, losing the thought of rusty metallic hinge pin noise. The bird flew and rested on the balcony wall to enjoy the scene of someone losing balance of the door torque and falling. With a sharp chirp it released the leg from the thin railing and disappeared leaving no traces. As if it agreed with Skyler, calling me naive. A debate about who actually was naive took place. No wonder I got close enough to her to not skip by agreeing to everything Skyler said.

“Come on. Imagine you’re spying on someone. Would you leave your ally over a misstep? I am quite experienced in spying silently.”

“Good. Now answer me—who did you spy on?”

“Ah. It . . . I mean, that’s . . . Forget it. It’s raining outside. Let’s go outside.”

Skyler winked, “Oh, I will forget. Let’s get going.”

The silent mansion echoed the restless steps on the wooden stairs. The days I spied, are special memories to me. Aria was my partner in crime, taking turns to spy on people we turned into

characters for an unwritten, ridiculous drama. Racing with the speed of raindrops, we reached the door of the garden. Opening the door with force invited a gust of wind, making the glass of the chandelier celebrate the once-regular but now-rare bloom of life. While stepping onto the wooden stairs, the rain slowed and then disappeared.

“Autumn rain sure is unpredictable. Skyler, why do you think poets and writers are so fascinated by autumn? Don’t people prefer certainty. . . stability? The rainy season should be more loved, don’t you think?”

“A moment ago you were nagging about your semester. How’s your class going? You have an upcoming test, right? Gonna pass?”

“No. I haven’t even bought the course book yet. When is this damn semester gonna end?”

“Already completed the syllabus for the next semester?”

“Stop kidding. My fantasy about my major courses faded a lot.” “But after college, things will change. We won’t just be switching grades anymore.”

“Who cares? I hope the exams end in one go.”

“See! Stability, adventure, hardship. . . none of that is favored by humans. They don’t know how to be happy with the moment. Don’t ever dare to compare such things to the seasons.”

“Hmm.”

“You know, the long summer makes the rainy season hold its tears for so long that at some point, it can’t hold them in any longer and cries them all out. But autumn doesn’t hold its emotions for long. It cries when it feels heavy, laughs when it sees the dazzling sun reflecting the golden rays on the tears. Those two can’t be compared. Neither can my love for those two patterns be. You get what I mean?”

“...”

The conversation took a long time. In the meantime the rain again visited the earth for a really short period. We lost the chance to walk in the rain. At that moment Skyler suggested walking inside the deeper part of the garden with large trees.

“Nova. It’s still raining here.”

“But the rain stopped. Is it any magical trick?”

“It sure is. After all, nothing in this universe is too short to find beauty. Why would autumn rain

lose to that universal truth?"

"So they are like this during the rainy season too?"

"Not quite. In the rainy season it rains for long and often slows down before stopping. However in autumn, since the rain stops suddenly, you get the difference easily."

The autumn rain comes and goes all the time. The raindrops, collected by the tree leaves, shower slowly even after the rain stops. Nature holds many conflicting thoughts at the same time. But they never belittle the other one's imagination. I struggled to walk confidently without an umbrella even then. However, it was easier than the last few years.

The wet grasses under a tree made canopy was a great place for birds to hunt food. A bunch of common myna sat on the grass, peck for food, walked and jumped.

"Skyler, do you know we had a belief regarding the common myna back in school. We were told if you see one common myna it would be a bad day, two for a good day, three for guests, four for extreme good luck and five for extreme bad."

"You believe it?"

"Back then, I did. Especially as I had guests at home when I met three of them. But the friend I mentioned earlier, Aria, would often count the mynas living in the school yard, mostly a group of four. However, the days were not extremely good every day. So I stopped."

Skyler stared at me without mocking the childish thought. We took initiative to count them. We failed as some flew, came down and jumped. The numerous folk of mynas kept singing at their own pace with their varied singing patterns. I don't know all of Autumn's treasures. But I know meeting this large folk of mynas cannot be anything other than good luck.

## **Chapter 11**

### **A Hidden Place Without Hiding the Wish**

Everything has a flaw. The longer we stay, the easier it is to find the flaws and overlook the beauty. Is that why ephemeral autumn is shrouded in mystery?

Autumn brings many festivals. In the countryside late autumn holds a special festival surrounding new crops. I wonder if it means the same festival today as before. However, the city turned the occasion as a day to celebrate following traditional manners. Our college decided to celebrate this on a certain Thursday. Our focus was traditional cake fair and dress code was traditional dresses. Our department assigned a large corridor for the fair. Some students took the responsibility to set the cake stalls. Then the long discussion about the dresses started. The colour code ended in yellow.

On the much anticipated morning I dressed in a light yellow dress made of a pattern of silk. Adjusting each fold with care, I missed the first two buses. I barely caught the third bus. I could only find another senior from my department. The corridor was not that crowded at arrival. With the hope to meet with other girls in my class, I went to the common room. However, the room was crowded with students from other years. I sat in one corner staring at the distant sky. I must have been quite unsightly for the people doing makeovers or adjusting ornaments in small groups. About fifteen minutes later one of our classmates arrived, followed by another one. Hesitant to go in the crowd alone, I accepted their proposal for going together. By then the stalls were super crowded. We bought a bunch of cakes and went to the garden. A cultural program was arranged there. One corner was decorated as a photographing area. No wonder, that turned into the main attraction for everyone. Bit by bit many classmates gathered and bit by bit I got my freedom.

When the sun reached the top, a break was announced. It was getting harder to keep pace with the folks. Boarding on the bus, I recalled it was three hours earlier than my returning time. I have to waste these hours, else my whole morning for dressing up will be for naught. My strolling universe had only a part of college, my school and that mansion. I wished Skyler to be present there. I feared I was getting used to searching for Skyler. Somehow I knew, I was longing to have a conversation like old times, which I have been trying to restrain myself from for the last few years.

“Wow, it’s an honor to have such a beautiful lady as our guest today.”

The girl standing on the roof shouted. She came to the yard hurriedly.

“That’s quite a compliment. Thank you, Skyler.”

“No, no. How can I not compliment a stupid child suddenly acting like a graceful lady.”

“I am taking my ‘thank you’ back.”

A roll of laughter echoed through the garden. While chatting our feet led us towards the deeper part of the garden. The extended end of my dress draped from my shoulder, which I had been holding across my back, slipped from my elbow, released as I eased into myself, into the quiet world. The chat drifted into a discussion about the outfit, and without meaning to, I blurted out my wish to wear matching glass bangles.

“I see. Then why did you skip that? I guarantee that, glass bangles of any shade of yellow or even a combination of light shades will stand out with your outfit.”

“Right? ”

Last night I arranged white, yellow and golden bangles. However, jingling glass bangles among the crowd will crave more attention beside the silk dress. Even a bracelet and a ring made quite a scene for someone who generally doesn’t wear them. In the end those get to hide in the dark side pocket of my bag.

“Hey, no problem with a little makeover and jewellery here, right?”

“Here? Obviously I will love to try. Unfortunately I did not bring anything with me.”

“Leave that to me.”

Skyler, who never wears any jewellery or makeover, having those in this secret place was hard to believe. The autumn breeze carried a light fragrance in the garden, making my path guide, to stop.

“Here.”

Shaded by a tree, I stood bewildered. The ground full of night-flowering jasmine, fallen from the branch. The absence of footsteps kept them in perfect shape. The girl sat on the ground, her off-white gown folding gracefully, creating a perfect match of grace with the delicacy of the night-flowering jasmine. Her hand moved quickly, pressing the orange center in the middle of the creamish petals.

“Skyler! Are you...”

“Making a crown of Shiuli. Oh, also a bracelet.”

Following her lead, I assembled the flowers in the same manner. Taking a thread from one corner of my handloomed scarf, I strengthened the crown. Resting the fresh crown and bracelet in a corner, she asked, “Nova, any preferred style for makeover?”

“I am not quite a fan of that. Maybe lip gloss is all in my style.”

“Perfect.”

She turned and stood in front of the hibiscus tree. Autumn red hibiscus was in full bloom.

“Bright or soft shades?”

“I am not quite aware of the match of shades with skin tone.”

“There is nothing called match with skin tone. It is just an average of higher preferences by most humans. I wish to know your preference.”

“Softer one.”

With a smile of relief she again bent, analyzing the fallen flower and suggesting one to take.

“Nova, do you have a water bottle? Maybe?”

“Ah. I do.”

“Great. Soak these flower petals for a bit.”

Soaking one hibiscus petal in the bottle cap, I wanted to know the reason behind her analyzing the fallen flower.

“Red hibiscus petals give a deep red color. Since you prefer, softer shade a bit dried one would do. Luckily, among the few fallen flowers we had a half dried one.”

“If I preferred bright colors?”

“We may need to cut one or if you refuse, I would have to overlook your preference.”

“I am glad.”

“You really should be. Now take the petal and rub it in your fingers.”

“Skyler! Skyler! It has a beautiful pink shaded extract.”

“Hurry and apply it on the lip before it dries off.”

The slightly cooled extract touched my lips, and when I looked up, a cold wind made the bright red hibiscus in the tree twirl as if celebrating a great happiness.

I turned to find Skyler holding the crown, as if she were about to crown a princess. She stood on a rock, as if to place the royal crown on the princess. Graceful and still, I stood before her—ready to receive it. The soft, off-white crown rested on my scarf —a quiet declaration of graceful achievement. The secret crowning ceremony had everyone from the garden invited. The cogon grass, growing freely among the flowers, blessed the moment as its soft white blossoms broke free, drifting through the air like cheering for the princess.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Preferred Silence**

Queen Autumn celebrated a crowning ceremony, showering the land with her full beauty. The one-day princess was entrusted with the task of solving the mystery of Queen Autumn within that day. As if, if she succeeded, she would become the new queen. I called my mother to inform her of my late return. The worry in her voice was clear as water, natural after a decade of not making such claims. When I mentioned I was with a friend from school, her worry quickly turned to relief. I wondered, if I had said I was with a friend from college, would she have felt the same? Perhaps not. The college me, who hardly ever hung out with friends, might have made it sound more like an excuse. What had changed between school and college? The princess who couldn't solve her own mystery, yet dared to challenge the queen—how absurd.

Deciding to visit the same pond we visited last season, we immediately set off. Luckily, the road was not crowded. That magical field was longing for the magical little spirits to return, as it was still the school hour. Continuing, we reached the pond. The burflower tree concealed its name card as the season was over. Without those bright flowers, people like me with little knowledge of trees can hardly identify them. The area was more deserted than last time. Wandering freely in the woods, a sweet echo of laughter reached us. We followed it slowly, as if trying to catch a cautious butterfly. We found at a distance a group of people sitting on a cotton sheet spread on the soft grass, making a circle. There were about eleven or twelve people of different generations. A sight I got to see many years later. However the younger generation was not only children, but also teenagers and young people. All faces filled with real smiles. Stare at them as long as you want and devour the poignant truth that growing up doesn't mean all gathering will be painful. Afraid to chase away the butterfly while trying to stare at it, we went to a different side of the pond. Rows of wild sugarcane grew near a corner, almost with no visitors. They screamed the presence of autumn. A light wind, cloudy sky, slightly wet soil were the perfect place for the silk dress and flower crown to show the beauty. I kept walking by the pond side slowly. Another row of trees rested in the view. The slow growing ice apple tree crossed the large mango tree. The ice apples were over ripened by then, with a deep brown skin. A strong smell was lingering in the air. Maybe a bird tore open some fruits. Homes and populated parks must be full of the jaggery mixed Taler Bora's sweet smell.

“Woah! Skyler, look. Over there! Over there!”

“Ice apple? However, they are not that tasty to eat raw now.”

“Come on. I know that . Look at that branch.”

For people in my city black bird will definitely create an image of a crow in thought. However I spotted a black bird following a rhythmic call, sitting on a higher branch. Most exciting part was its tail, like a fish tail.

“Drongo? That’s a black Drongo.”

“Drongo!! The Drongo from the poem in our school book? They are cool.”

“ Seriously? What a kid!”

“Ahaha. I need to keep my voice down, else it might fly.”

“No worries. They are territorial. They would rather make you leave. If you seem threatening though.”

However, a fascination made me follow them. I wonder what you will call it? Childish? Naive? Escapist? Dreamer? It’s hard to decide what it is truly called. While following it I stumbled more than once.

“I knew you were clumsy for a long time. Not to mention even on plane street. How come you got clumsier?”

“Who is clumsy in the first place? Let alone being clumsy.”

“Being used to walking while looking downward is bound to make your steps clumsy.”

“I missed it. It is still calling. Maybe out there..Ah . . .”

“Nova?”

I stumbled again, losing my control. Luckily there was a large tree beside. My right feet slipped on the bend with mud. Grabbing the tree trunk harshly, somehow I regained my balance. I was hurted badly. There were some thin parts on the trunk that pricked my hand-palm.

“Nova.. I get it might be hurting. But can you also care about the deep cut in your wrist?”

“No. I am more used to getting cut than prick.”

Skyler seemed rather shocked. A bit later the thin crisp feeling faded. Our walk resumed. Still keeping my eyes on those branches I found there was a pair of red vented bulbul, jumping among

the branches for a long time. However they were not quite vocal. If I was not looking upward for the drongo, I might have missed it.

“Why are those red vented bulbuls so silent?”

“Red vented bulbuls are naturally quieter than other common birds around.”

“That’s why I miss them in the neighborhood even though they are common there?”

“That’s the truth, Nova.”

“Hmm.”

“If you remain quiet mostly you won’t be visible. Though you may not need a constant chirp. But you need a voice, maybe like your fascinating drongo.”

The bulbuls made too few calls then others. When a chirping sparrow sat close to it in the same branch. It did not even move. Opposite to the drongo. My excitement for drongo shifted in a moment to those bulbuls. If I was given the choice, I might choose to be a red vented bulbuls. The sun rested on the horizon. Days passed. Autumn kept running with time, inviting late autumn to lace the air with a gentle chill, while fading with quiet grace, crowned in unassailable pride.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Once Soft Rain, Now the Remainder of Winter**

The occasional rain reduced its visit to the home of mortals. The cold wind was invited to fill the blank. Is nature really innocently beautiful or trickily perfect? Life kept marching in its usual steps. One day my sister called announcing her one week vacation. She was returning home after quite a long. The whole home had a festival vibe just for one person. I was also longing for it. Afterall, I was going to have another chance to drag her to street food stalls, famous parks that I had not visited for about half a year. The day she arrived the home turned like before that instant. However I could not convince her to go out with me even for one afternoon. She wished to stay home all day for the whole seven days. I never stayed out of home for long. So, her wishes were alien to me. Still, I had a wish for her to stay with me 24/7 so maybe we were on the same boat. Seven days passed in a blink of an eye. Everything returned to normal life like before. I again started to wander.

“Nova. How have you been?”

The girl standing on the roof asked the moment I entered the yard of the beloved mansion.

“Fine. Sorry, I didn’t show up for a whole week. Actually my sister came home over the one week vacation?”

“Oh,right? How long has it been since I saw her? How is she?”

“How do you know her?”

“Your memory of small details are too good.Then how are you so clumsy about normal things? Didn’t you and your sister go to the same school?”

I felt too stupid for my own memory. It is not totally a fault of memory though. I didn’t feel the sweet presence of being at the same school with my sister until she graduated. What of my thought was at fault . . . . , I still cannot figure. Our usual stay on the roof continued.

“Nova.. it’s quite unusual for you to surf on a mobile screen. Or maybe you are also actively scrolling through feeds!!”

“Nah. I am not quite active scrolling social media feeds. Scroll too long and let alone finding motivation, you will even lose the force to live without motivation.”

“Sure thing, there would be a lot of people. So comments might vary.”

“Is that so? However it may be a source to keep you in a deep bind of being mocked. The percentage of mockery and praise differs a lot.”

“I see. Then what are you doing?”

“Nothing. Just trying to find a way to choose after graduation.”

“Hmm. Your face doesn’t say so.”

“That’s actually last week my sister had been talking about her difficulties after graduation. I was wondering how hard it might be.”

“There is no hint of wonder. Rather a clear scar of fear.”

I was struggling to get my own self. Trying to get Skyler seemed harder. Leaving my phone in one room, we went out of the mansion. The unattended garden kept waving the branch to attend the occasional guests. Wandering around we arrived on another walkway. Oddly enough, that one was coated with cement while the main entrance walkway was of soil!! A faint ghost of some lines still clung to the uneven surface. It resembled a path for playing hopscotch. Searching through the soil nearby, we found some broken pieces of brick. Their surfaces were too smooth and slippery to draw. Rubbing them against the path, they became perfect to sketch lines on the ground. Redrawing the lines and extending it further the ground seemed totally new. We needed one stone to play. Again rummaging the soil we found a perfect one. I returned to the starting point , threw the stone and it jumped to stop at a double square followed by a single square. Jumping till the single square, I somehow balanced on one leg to pick the stone. I continued to play while talking with Skyler.

“You seem quite passionate to draw with the piece of brick. Did you use them before to draw?”

“Hmm. Back then we used to play with chalk. So, brick pieces were rather like a coloured chalk beside the white one?”

“Nova, how would you remove the lines made with the brick?”

“Ah! That’s why we needed to use them as little as possible. We would bring the small pieces of unusable chalk to play. However, one day the whiteboard entered the room resting against the wall. The whiteboard gradually gnawed at the blackboard, making it vanish beneath layers of wall paint, while the chalk stick was crushed to powder beneath the desk. So only brick pieces were left.”

A wind bought a moment of silence among the tiny world. The extended line had an increasing

number of single squares followed one by another. I struggled to balance.

“Why don’t the boxes end?”

“Who made such a long way? No worries. The urge to see the end of the path will help to keep going faster.”

“As if.”

“Then what is ‘keep going’ to you?”

“Keep going is nothing. Just a phrase to either think it is easy since they passed the road or to get rid of the unnecessary involvement.”

“That’s your definition??”

“.....Then, what’s yours?”

The number of single boxes increased drastically. My arrogance of winning the play I was good at in childhood started to fade. I started to lose balance every time I jumped to a new box.

“The raindrops on a glass. The journey of rain ends when the drops touch the ground. Gravity is the hope they hold on to. If they lose the will, they evaporate away. But many drops struggle halfway through. Sliding down the glass, they leave a lot of parts of their own behind, losing the force to follow gravity. However, if another drop merges along the way, it brings back a memory left behind, giving the drop new speed. Neither loses speed — rather, both gain a new momentum toward the end. Now, in this run, which raindrops will merge — or if the two droplets were actually one — or if any will at all — is unknown. But at the end of the day each raindrops are a part of the rain. Those that evaporated need to start again. Like that the rain keeps going. That’s what ‘keep going’ means to me.”

The path was about to end as the stone landed outside the boxes. Only five more single squares remained while I stood on a double square. As always, understanding Skyler’s definitions was harder than understanding my own. But as I jumped the last box, I realized one thing: for this hopscotch path, my ‘keep going’ was the stubborn urge to relive the childhood me. Or was the childhood me the push all along? The tree standing near spread a hand to a tired crow. When the crow regained the energy. It flew, leaving a feather as a gift for the tree. The black feather twirled while standing upright slowly reaching to the ground. It touched the ground with the stick and rested the soft feathery head on the small stone with peace.

## **Chapter 14**

### **Don't Lose the Gemstones, in Search of Glass Beads**

The breeze before sunrise started to get cooler. My beloved Winter left the hint of its arrival. The pleasant breeze was my means to soothe the sudden tightness in the chest. A feeling I often feel. However, back then it was increasing too fast. An unknown sensation I am sure to have met before started lingering around. That was not the first time though. The eagerness to walk the paths I regularly passed once started to deem often. The mansion and the abandoned park remained in the list as they were near to my home.

That day we had lab classes in the afternoon. The classes were going at its pace. I somehow lost my spirit to attend the classes. The daily laughter, irrelevant jokes no longer made the natural curve creating a smile. Throwing the perfect attendance aside, I left before lunch. When the bus stopped at our stoppage, I went to the mansion. As expected no one was there as it was not even twelve on the clock. I went to the second floor. Usually we talk in the Jasmine room. However I entered the adjacent room. Opening the door of the balcony and window, fresh air of late autumn raced to enter. While opening the window there was a ‘thud’ sound. The table was empty. Removing the table a bit, a small sized notebook was found. The pages turned yellowish with the lovely old page scents. It was full of drawings with crayons. There was a drawing of two children. From the dress pattern and drawing style the elder one was a girl and way older than the other. The latter pages had some scribbles and lines, hard to get. But one had a hopscotch pattern drawn on a road that divided forward. Some trees, red dots and other details were there with an X sign at the road going to the right. Each drawing must have a deep meaning to that child. While changing the pages of secret stories, my story’s princess entered.

I was too excited to learn about those roads divided after the hopscotch road. The red lines made by piece or brick were still vivid. Taking right from there, there seemed to be some places with plants or grasses. Maybe years before it was a playground without those plants. The open field might have regained life with all those years of rain. However a bordered area around the cement road hardly had those plants. It was covered with some vine type small round leaves plant. Walking a bit further the bright red seed reflected against the sunlight. I looked above to find a large red sandalwood tree. I collected a lot of the beautiful seeds. They were spread over a large area. The map in that notebook had that X sign exactly by the tree. Maybe the seeds were something special to them. However while collecting the seeds fell earlier and pressed in the soil a bit, something metallic was there. Removing the soil a bit more we found a rusty tin box.

Trying too hard to open them, finally we got the things inside. The tin box had a small plastic cup full of larger size glossy glass beads and some mere childish pictures. The cup also had some paper pieces written with different color names.

“Skyler, have you played a bead game with a color name before?”

“No. You did?”

“Hmm, no. We used to play a glass bead game back in secondary school. But it was not colorful.”

“...”

“Our game was quite good. Actually it is not a game other people might know. Adira invented it. Though we were secondary school students by then, she didn’t care about others’ opinions like ‘Eh? Are you a child?’ or blah blah blah. One day she was making a small island in the soil with water trapped in it. To make it look beautiful we left some glass beads in the glassy water. Next day we made a bigger island and bought a lot of glass beads. Collecting them was bothersome. So Adira came up with the game. A bunch of rewards were written in the papers. Every ten beads would let you pick one reward. But the rewards were written in two types of things. Some were like snacks, hairbands, ribbons, Others were some tasks more like dare. Except for Adira, all of us felt the latter as a trap. So, we would only wish for the first type of rewards. However, after some search the water would turn so muddy that searching them was too frustrating. After all, I used to give up first.”

“Sounds like you enjoyed them a lot.”

“Let’s try it.”

I started to make the island in one corner without plants. And spread the glass beads in water. We didn’t have any reward items so we collected fallen flowers and wrote their names on papers. Other papers had silly tasks. I wrote them, so they sounded way more childish. Like standing on one leg, singing a song, three frog jumps etc.

“Ok. I am shuffling the cards. If you give up halfway you die. Oh. The cards are called gemstone. I don’t know why? The motto is ‘Don’t lose the gemstones in search of glass beads.’”

The game began. The cards turned one after another. Loud laughter passed through the rows of trees. The bead search gradually turned into a war. I tried to give up, but the other player mocked everytime. Since it was one-to-one play, giving up will clearly announce the winner. Hours passed to end the game. We were tired of laughing.

“Hey Skyler. How was it?”

“You still need to ask?”

“See. That’s Adira for you. Back then Naira, Hina, Anaya, Aria and I were forced to play till the end. Just like someone did today.”

“As expected from the inventor Adira. Do you recall when you all would play the game?”

“Don’t laugh, Ok? The day before the exam.”

“I see. You told me that back then the highest level of difficulty was passing English dictation and Arabic sentence making, right? That was the limit to decide whether you live or not?”

“Ahaha. That’s true.”

“Adira set the game with the meaning.”

“What?”

“Since I never asked her perspective, mine is not the same as hers. But the message is the same. The glass beads are each step or stage. It may be clear now, but may not be later. The cards are the gemstone, the reward of the persistence of searching the glass beads. However to keep searching that size glass beads in the mud till the last one is counted is exhausting. If you are too focused on the glass beads you are going to lose sight of the gemstone. . . . ‘Don’t lose the Gemstones, in search of Glass Beads.’ ”

“...”

Averting my eyes from her, I kept recalling the days. It’s not a lie. For those exams, the dependence of life on it is a joke now. But back then it was not. Even some headlines of newspapers hold the proof. But for Nova beside Skyler then, the road in front was full of mud. Breathing in the mud was harder than her imagination. She struggled to recall if the Nova beside Adira and others had the same feeling. The Adira who forced others to breathe from time to time, how did she breathe herself? Do people like her, stay as a shadow? Not only Adira, I can ensure Naira, Hina, Anaya, Aria and many more were like her at times I needed.

“Being a shadow is horrible?”

“Maybe. It may leave you in the dark.”

“They are not shadows. What are they? I mean like..”

I need not to tell her more. She replied, “They are more like silhouettes. Shadow and silhouette, which one do you want to be?”

“...”

“I would love to be a silhouette. Shadows remain there as long as light is present. In darkness you cannot find them. But the silhouette will be there. You can find them in the tiniest bit of light present. When it is totally dark, you cannot see the silhouettes either, but they remain there still reachable.”

When we removed the cup from the tin box, another note was left. “ Ten years from now, I will surely learn to play the game. Let’s play then, sister. -07/07/2010” The whole day’s drama melted before that line. Washing the beads and drying them properly I returned them to their place. As an apology I left some most reflecting red sandalwood seeds on the drawings. Surely it was not opened after ten years. The day we went to the pond, Skyler told me I am truly blessed and I would get that someday. The reason behind such a comment was unknown to me. Still, it started to echo in my mind at that moment. The rest of the red seeds turned in the elements of the odd even play, gradually reducing in number as losing one or two each time playing.

## **Chapter 15**

### **A Beauty to See**

My beloved winter came to knock on my door. The early morning turned to the misty dreamland. The leaves started to collect dew. At night even the city holds the smell of burning woods. No wonder in rural areas the burning woods fragrance throughout the night was melting with the smell of boiling date jaggery and milk made juice for the rice cakes. In the city, the street wakes with the daybreak while the morning dew hides in the air. The main gate of my college is at the west, same for the pocket gate of our department. In the cool winter, entering the gate feels like, after the rush of cool wind on a speeding bus, receiving a warm hug from the soft sunshine.

My friend Winter urged me to visit that pond again. Years ago, I first went there with my sister. This time, I didn't plan with Skyler. I wished to visit there alone. As the direction is opposite to my college, instead of boarding the regular bus, I crossed the road to board the bus to my destination. Reaching the different city as I walked towards the road further from the city the mist turned denser. When I reached that field, not a single soul was there. The small store, where we bought snacks last time, was opening. Hoping to get one cup of tea, I went there.

"Sister!! Have you come to visit here again? Let's play." a sweet voice of a child shouted.

"Enough of playing. You have been playing since dawn. Go to school now.." a woman said with an angry voice to that child. Turning to me she asked in the local dialect, "What will you take, dear?"

"A cup of tea?"

"Oh. Sit here. Seems you visit here often, as this little monkey knows you."

"Yes. I visit sometimes."

"In this cold, tea is a must. But the sun is already up, so it is not that cold. Why don't you take a glass of freshly collected date juice? Shoshi, bring her one." said the man sitting inside the store.

The girl jumped to take the juice from the clay pot. While holding it to me, she started to talk about her experience of collecting them. Her speech was as calm and beautiful as her name Shoshi, meaning the moon. That sweet family made my cold winter morning a warm one. While returning the glass, as I got a special menu out of the list , I was not sure of the price I owed.  
"Um..."

"Where are you heading to, dear?" with a clear rejection of further talk, the woman asked.

"To the pond."

"Today's children who come here to visit hardly go there. But, that's the advantage you will get to see something very beautiful out there. Also, take this monkey with you. Her school is there." she said pointing to the building on the other side of the road.

Shoshi happily wished to go with me. As we left, I bought two slices of cake and bade a respectful farewell to the wonderful shop owners. While walking we talked and ate the cake. In front of her school, we bade each other with the hope to meet again. The latter path had many fields of mustard plants. In winter the yellow mustard flowers covered the field dancing with the pace of the wind. Reaching the pond, very few people were there. The small presence of humans made the place richer in life. Many species of migratory birds, especially those that stay beside water, were resting there. Cormorants are common in this region. The pond water wave was created by them. Those were larger than the regular cormorants I knew. Maybe those were some migratory species. Circling in a small radius, they observed their prey. When some were found they drove in quickly, coming out again. This repeated. Some even flew to a distance. Many species of migratory birds were nearby. Was this the site I was told to be beautiful? Hours passed staring here and there looking at the birds I didn't even know the name of. I went a bit further. Very near I found a ground that was a bit lower than the neighbouring area. Maybe the rainy season gifted it a bunch of water to grow many types of floral plants that are large in an ignored place treasured by sunlight. The plants were offered to get a new decor. Different sized butterflies! The large ones were mostly colorful, with a combination of black, orange, brown, blue, and light green, with black elegant patterns, flapping their wings to create a different flow, interrupted by fast-paced, small, still-cool yellow, white, and light yellowish-green colored butterflies. About ten years ago, the third floor of our school had classrooms of the class my sister was in. Woah, even before she graduated. She came to my class to take me there before the class started. When I reached there, I discovered the ceiling of the third floor of the north building was covered with butterflies. Till that day, I never saw that many butterflies at once. Generally they keep the wings together while sitting on any surface. But many of them moved their wings slowly while sitting for long. While observing the flying butterflies before me, those memories danced in my mind creating a question: how did such an uncommon thing happen before me? Different species of butterfly flying in an area under sunlight is common in winter, but different species resting in the same ceiling is not. Suddenly a whirring sound passed by my side. A transparent winged dragonfly. It flapped the wing in one place as if to ask, are

we not visible for colorless transparent wings? Following them out I returned to the pond side. The colorful butterfly and the feathery birds came for the winter, still creating their own area. Those dragonflies seemed to be carefree. Maybe they had the power to enjoy the beauty over personal space. As a being worse to describe then all of them stared at the dragonflies envying to be born as a different one. Some of them rested in the leaves, one sat on the loosen end of my scarf, clinging tightly. Their transparent wings reflected against the color of the scarf; as if claiming the power of a transparent water to blend different colourful mixtures of nature.

That night, I went to the rooftop of our apartment. The cold breeze made the winter night feel more isolating. The distant large building's channel letters light created a hazy shadow on the roof wall. The elegant black sky holded a blurry whitish paint of the mist. Amidst the mist a V shaped object with off-white outline coming to my side. An airplane? No, an airplane this low with no vibration is not possible. The sweet souls saw the confused figure in a small distance, deciding to unfold the mystery. The lines were moving a bit, scattering and curving again. Yes, a folk of birds flying in a V shape. As if the one in the front was leading the group. A folk of migratory birds in the night sky flying for a long distance. How did this city night and the people seem, to the birds living in some far away country, came here searching for warmth?

## **Chapter 16**

### **The Falling Afternoon of the Winter**

Human life is like seasons. Every season has its own fragrance. Winter is no different. The wind carries those secrets to us. But there is another speciality of the seasons. The sky. The color and design changes over time. Such a winter sky has my special fondness. Looking above, inhaling the wind slowly, you will feel a shiver. Like you slowly inhaled the smoke spreading through the veins, melting the unseen clot.

The winter sky of dawn and dusk holds such a wisp. The sun rises taking a more intense yellow shade making the clouds nearby golden. The sunset is more dramatic. The sun turns from yellow to orange then red, alone between the sky blue and white. Gradually the red shade is transferred to the cloud pieces. The single red circle now accompanied by red, yellow, orange and white clouds twirl against the sky blue. The long evening shares the timespan with the setting sun, revealing the color play against light blue till deep blue. That play always worked as a healer to me. The last class test exam of the semester was held. The exams were in the afternoon, so the sweet sky was a regular page for some days in a row. By the end of November the class tests ended. Though the last day of exam is always peaceful; something felt like clotting the red blood cells in the vein. Something tried to stop the oxygen meeting those cells. The sky was crowded with clouds creating a whole red shade. The lack of oxygen made the beauty feel as if an inner bleed. The bus lacked air circulation in this season because of the cold gust in a speedy run. Through the window I saw the bloody sky gradually turning from deep red to black. The same way blood dries. But when the bus turned to the road at west, there was a bright star tilted a bit southwest. Even the LED billboard lost its brightness. Jupiter, shining as if a light born among the dried cells. The bus speeded up, making the wind through the narrow gap of the window more chilling to bring me back to reality.

That night, amidst the unease a notification popped up. After the exam nobody really chats about necessary things. Maybe I could use their jokes as a switch of mood, at least that I thought. It was not from a group chat. Anaya!! One text, ‘How have you been?’ I replied and one or two texts passed more, before she asked, ‘Can you meet?’ I started to search for the excuse to refuse, when the phone rang. Why?

“Anaya? What’s up?”

“How fare are your days and times?” The cool line I have been hearing throughout my life.

“As usual. How about you?”

“Can you meet me this week?”

“This week? That’s..”

“ I am going abroad for higher studies. I still need to prepare many things. However I got the confirmation email today. . . ”

She said many details. However I could not concentrate on most of it. Just at the end she requested to meet if possible. The call ended. Until then I mostly made excuses. Life has a mandatory course to teach about human change. I already completed it. But the result was more a nightmare than a lesson. The sweet group of kids that travelled from throwing scrape notes on glass table to play ‘thief, robber, police, mayor’ to a circle gossiping while unshelling the roasted peanuts as an expert, changed. That was the truth. But when those changed people were again together forming the same circle, they searched for the old beauty. The old beauty had a deep connection with their past selves. One may feel like before at times, but one cannot easily turn like before whenever they wish. Constant clashes and already different journeys made it more painful. Now we resent and pray for the same people at different times. However, the human point of view varies. Maybe they still pray while I only resent them. That is more scary. That’s why, I am afraid to meet those friends who still hold laughter and joy as their last memory with the other. Anaya was one of them. So, not answering was the best option. The night was too cold to stop shaking no matter how many clothes I wore or sweat. I only had some photos of our class party from ten years back. Though social media has a lot of individual photos, our group photos are not there. After all, such things were not that adored back then. In one photo, Adira was in the back standing; Aria, Naira, Anaya sitting on the bench; me and Hina in front of them sitting on the ground. Hina also left the country about three years ago. Before leaving, Adira called and asked me to make some time to meet Hina. But, my surroundings back then made me ignore the request. When I felt that the surrounding was not that serious issue, my stupid mind was; I badly wished to meet her. But by then almost a year passed. Every year at the school reunion, Anaya asked me to go. I made excuses. Maybe next time, but next time never came. Still there is hope since we were near, maybe tomorrow. But different countries are no joke. Taking the phone I messaged “Are you free tomorrow or the day after that?”

“Tomorrow. Be free for the whole day, ok?” An immediate message popped up.

With a ‘your wish is my command’ the chat ended. The following morning we met. In the morning, she seemed a bit confused. No wonder a new horizon is opening. However, her

reasoning behind people's wish to go abroad was quite opposite to me. If it was any other time than a week before her leave, I would have a debate with her. From noon to evening we returned to ourselves. We mostly reminisced. Then another friend of hers joined and the chat turned more lively. I spotted Skyler in the distance. Like before, I was afraid to make the last meeting with Anaya anything other than a true smile. The less the better. Seemed like the girl who saw me from a distance perfectly got my fragile personality and smiled warmly turning to her direction. Our path matched a long way. Still I was not capable of introducing Skyler to Anaya. When we took our final farewell, I felt like just returning home after school. I still wish to know how she felt. I wonder how Hina has been. The rest of the day passed without any track of time.

The next day, I went to the mansion after class. It was about noon when Skyler came. Somehow it was a bit awkward. As I pretended not to know her yesterday.

"How did the reunion go?"

"Ah.. good. Yesterday I.. it was great..."

"How is Anaya? It's been a long time since I saw you two together."

"You remember her too? It's great. Actually she is leaving for higher studies abroad."

"Oh. But both of you seemed to be enjoying it. Shall I take it as you are not sad or worried."

"Why will I be sad? I meet them maybe once every ten years. We talk on social media sometimes which is still there. She is going to a broader horizon. I hope everything turns out to be good there."

"That's good. But you don't seem like your usual self. Anything you want to talk about? Only if you feel fine with sharing."

"I apologize again. I don't recall you meeting back in school days. But you might recall some. How do you think I was?"

"Based on your friends you were a really good person. You get that even now."

"Based on others?"

"What you truly are can not be known by just your group of friends. As you hardly hang out or do group work, you hardly stay with them for even one third of the day. To give an average performance in that short time is very easy."

"..."

“It is hard to get a human totally no matter how close you are. The level of them knowing you may differ.”

“...”

“Don’t pretend not to get it. The classmates around you don’t know a side of you back from school. You used to joke around in school. Though from higher secondary you put a leash on it. There would hardly be any student in your college who heard you joking, right? But, you joke often when we talk.”

“Ah. Leave the other people aside. I don’t even get myself totally. Like you said, I believed I am at least one of the well mannered people this far. After all, like our peers I didn’t like to use slang or inappropriate language. But at times I feel it is fine for those I hate. The other day, someone I had once justified for their language stood up against a small act — the kind we often overlook — that was clearly disrespectful to someone older. It had been unintentionally directed, which made it easier for us to ignore. Watching them take that stand, while I didn’t bother, made my quiet pride in my own manners crumble to dust..”

“See? However, as long as you get that and obviously act on it that’s fine.”

The words were true. But amidst them the reality of my fear or inability were hidden deep down. Ah, now I get her. No one in the world gets to see your true nature in a whole, as we mostly perform the best part of ourselves. There are people who get the dark side of us, but even if they are close they either don’t know a darker wish or a lovely determination, sealed inside one.

The sun leaned to the horizon. The sky took the red again. But it was more a wonderful scene than the bleeding one. ‘The falling afternoon of the winter’ was a phrase our English teacher said back in our secondary school picnic, by the time it was about to end with a group photo. In one corner of the higher step, that place seemed surrounded by that beautiful sky. From that day, the falling afternoon of winter holds a different fragrance than the rest of the day. A fragrance mixed with mysterious nostalgia, beautiful admiration and courageous farewell. To add a different layer to the unique winter, the light wind gets the accompaniment of constantly falling Monkey pod tree leaves. As if to remind you, walking in a never ending drama of contrasts.

## **Chapter 17**

### **Dry Leaves and New Year**

Winter made the gardens full of yellow and orange colored marigolds. The sunlight brightened the tiny still bright petals of the marigold. On such a morning I again went to the mansion. On my way there something jumped on a plant I was passing. A yellow breasted bird. I am not quite knowledgeable about birds. However the beautiful red eyes were deep like the Asian koels. Yes, it was Plaintive Cuckoo, a migratory species. Generally they are shy. The area around the mansion, hardly visited by people, turned into a sanctuary for them. A single human seemed like no bother to them. There was no one in the mansion. Waiting hours, I returned home. The winter marched to the shivering mid, as the end of the year gradually came closer. Finally the end of the year came. Until secondary school, the end of the year was too beautiful. At least half month of vacation, then new class, new section distribution, new book distribution. From the final year of secondary school, the class shift was not in January. The books remained for longer than changing. All excitement called new year vanished. What remained is the fireworks. On the cold night, the different lights coloring different stories on every neighbouring rooftops.

That year, by the end, I wished I could meet Skyler once, even for a bit. Our daily meetings were delayed often. Due to the celebration the roads were full of many people even late at night. Walking outside seemed fine. Crossing the road, I was almost at the end of the front park. The road to the park behind it is more deserted even at daytime. That late at night it would be better to skip there, so I hoped Skyler would not be there. At the end of the park there was a figure standing a bit far from the crowd, leaning on a tree. My heart was full of joy, as I ran to her. However the girl standing seemed indifferent. Just then, the hour hand touched twelve. Throughout the surrounding the fireworks started in a rhythmic manner. Leaving the tree shade I ran to the open field. The shadow I was feeling from the previous time faded. The colour melting in black sky, a chilling wind blowing through the sides, distant cheering of people, music from some rooftops mixed creating a soft chill of happiness passed throughout my soul. The scenery of the fireworks was getting hazy from time to time. “You seem to be quite happy.” a voice full of hatred shouted.

“Skyler, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. You are the last person I expected to be so excited over something like this.” Her voice got harsher.

“...”

“If you are satisfied with seeing the fireworks for long enough, look at the other side.”

The other side of the sky, the side of the deserted park, was free from any fireworks. Clear black sky. Some birds flew from time to time. Why? It was unusual. Another flock of the migratory bird in V shape flew to the south. After a few moments, that pal returned to the north. It was getting worse the longer I looked. The migratory birds were not supposed to change a 180 degree direction. Then..

“Yes. Your beautiful fireworks are the reason. The regular birds are getting afraid of the sound, flying desperately. Those migratory birds are losing direction for random lighting. Now tell me which one is more beautiful?”

Seeing me shiver her voice softened. The fireworks no longer seemed as beautiful. While looking at the sky, a gust of wind blew, creating murmur of the dried fallen leaves. “Nova! I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Yeah.”

“..You are shaking violently. What’s wrong?”

“What?”

“Don’t force yourself to remain still. Want to return home?”

“Nah. It’s ok”

“What is it? Is the fireworks scaring you?”

“That sure is. Actually it is not quite scary. It’s just I am not quite a fan of the dry leaves murmuring sound.”

“Quite unexpected coming from the mouth describing every small natural beauty as a real stage performance.”

“Exactly. That is a part of it. But a part of the performance in real life, I hate the most, maybe, it’s more like a sound effect.”

“Of murmur of dry leaves?”

“Not exactly. But stepping on the dry leaves. The sound is so bothersome even after knowing it was smashed against the soft paws of the cats.”

“Go home.”

“You?”

“Worry about yourself.”

Parting with her, I followed the path to return. The park and roads were still fueled with people. The music from rooftops jumbled with the bursting sound of the fireworks. Returning home I could not sleep. The murmur of the dry leaves still vividly holds the memories. Before sunrise I went to our rooftop. The white sheets of the burned out sky lanterns were spread here and there. The scenery was more horrible than last night’s sky. The fog of the city didn’t give a chance to see the sun from the beginning. However, when the sun was at its peak, the warm light hugged the terrified souls from last night to come out in peace. When the fog melted, a cloud was visible. It was an uncommon shape, like a spiral whose outer end suddenly created a line way far from the dense center of the spiral. As if, the path to run away to an unknown beauty, so unnoticed in this chaos.

## **Chapter 18**

### **The Lost Spring**

The tiny branch of a growing tree visited the neighboring home through the net in winter. The winter left with the fog, leaving behind the cool breeze. The tree grew faster in the spring. The branch started to grow leaves, no turning back for it. The longer the branch could grow being unnoticed, it could live. Its life would gradually wither by hatred, mockery, pity, and at last either drying out without the care from the garden it was born in or being hit against a sharp knife from the neighboring garden. Thinking about the twisted fate the branch started to whiter even after receiving proper wind and water. At that moment the spring called out its name, unknown to the whole world. Spring told a story of a grown plant over the sun-shade of the neighbouring house. The branch and that plant had a similar situation. But the plant didn't bother about the fate, rather bloomed happily full of purple tiny flowers. The branch found a tiny hope that did not let it wither. Spring embarrassed the branch with a magic to bring it back to the lively leaves and bright bark.

The spring had a welcoming tone as the cool breeze passed under the presence of bright sunlight. The breeze held different aromas at different moments. That's the beauty of spring I could find that year. Back in childhood, spring was our favorite season. Why won't it be? Every essay, story about it had a common phrase 'season-king Spring'. Gradually winter and monsoon shared the space. My visit to the mansion decreased a lot. I did not feel like going there often. Even if I went there, I hardly met Skyler. The final exams were knocking on the door. However, that day, I skipped the class again. The empty mansion held a different beat. Standing on the roof of the mansion, I felt the unease that grew rapidly. Something colorless seemed to create a shield. I searched for my long beloved Spring in the sky, trees, birds, soils, clouds, everything in front of me. I lost them. If not for the time to time breeze with different aroma calmed me, I might suffocate. Hours of horror were shaken by someone's footsteps. Skyler was there, the one I wished to meet for weeks. But even she seemed to change. The feeling of easygoing and liveliness like my school days, I felt ever since I met her, was absent. At a time in our conversation about finding spring she said, "If you still feel the aroma, that's enough."

"I wish it was. Sometimes the beauty is enough to make you forced to lose your breath."

"It's not that easy. Have you ever heard the saying, 'If you want to die, throw yourself in the sea. You will find that you still wish to live.' Though I don't get what's the point knowing that when

you are already drowning.”

“Someone once gave me the solution. They said, once you drown, you don’t have an option to think or regret. You better start with a small fire. When you start to burn, you have an option to retreat, when the burn is severe you might get your sense back and get a chance to retreat till the moment the fire takes pity to swallow you. If you still don’t feel like retreating, then you will eventually get the wish you placed without regret.”

“And no one will randomly suggest something this terrible unless the situation forces them, will they?”

“If it was me, maybe yes.”

I never heard a reply for the whole day. That night I visited our home rooftop again. The night-blooming jasmine plant there bloomed. At night they spread a garden of dark fragrance throughout the surrounding announcing the existence of spring. Devouring them I felt calm to walk again.

The days remained to march on. Though a few days passed, it seemed to slow down a lot. The horrible feeling again started to linger in the surroundings. Even the only spring was gone. Throughout the preparation break, I could not focus. I badly needed to visit the school or the mansion. My mind did not support me with enough strength to go till school, I was left with just the choice of mansion. As I thought no one was there. On the rooftop I leaned on a chair. As far I recall, I kept asking for spring. Anything, aroma, sound or anything about my spring.

I kept muttering the same wish. The surrounding chirps were too loud. I wished they stopped. The suffocation felt to increase. I couldn’t feel anything. While raising the palm of hand that was clenching the chair, it was too violent to look at the trembling palm. The hand in front of me seemed unknown. So many scars. Some fresh cuts, one inflammation in finger, a long dried deep wound, they seemed unfamiliar. The unknown hand trembled more horribly. Another hand approached the horrible scene. Clasping to the pale hand, the latter pulled it upwards. Following the direction I found the hands against a clear blue. The latter hand released. I could hear someone singing slowly. However I couldn’t get what they sang, other than some words like ‘stumble’, ‘stain’, ‘glimpse’, ‘draft’ and at last ‘chance’. A soft breeze flowed through the gap of the fingers. It was no longer trembling. I knew that hand, the small burn was a silly mistake while showing off in front of sis, the long dried wound was a sweet story of a short race before morning assembly long ago, the fresh cut was from the sharp corner of the new story book that was just bought. So many stories in one palm of hand. A pair of wagtails flew side by side sitting

on two consecutive branches. They sang in turn and sometimes in chorus. How long I missed the sound of the spring. Taking out a notebook, I tore a fresh page. I wished to make a plane, but feared to lose in the unknown. I tore it in smaller pieces by the crease of the fold. Roughly tearing them, I made paper spinners. Releasing them from the rooftop I realised to gain back the feelings to find them beautiful even for a short moment. She walked to stand beside me. Taking one spinner vertically at the end of two fingers she said, “They seem rough-edged.” As she released one spinner, a gust of wind forced my spinners to fall at once. “Look over there, Nova”

As all the spinners fell at once, many failed to spin and directly fall. However, one spinner was falling as a speedy sparrow flew by, that spinner shifted the position and slowly started to spin.

“See. You know, I told you once not to devour the human made definition once. According to their definition all the spinners that are not released properly will directly fall.”

“But most of them did.”

“As if. Over there.” she pointed to two spinners stuck in tree branches.“They did not spin a single rotation, but there is a chance they will when they are released. That and those,” she again pointed at some spinners on the ground, “They landed perfectly, even better than the spinning ones.” Her description continued. In the end no single spinner was left which was a failure in this journey.

“Seems like I missed a lot of details.”

“Exactly. You don’t know when, how and who will help you regain the balance when you get tripped.”

I released the last spinner in my hand. The spinner slightly tilted once, about to clash with a tree branch. A gust of spring wind parted it. The spinner flew a bit further than the line and spun slowly. Finally ending touching the ground with one wing folded against the soil.

## **Chapter 19**

### **The Reality Before Giving Up**

The chill wind of spring started to get warmer. In the meantime our year final exam was held. The last day of the exam. The break was longer than the previous one. The tour plans started to crowd the arena in front of the exam center. Someone's help to get rid of the unbearable suffocation made me survive the exam. However it did not fade totally. I left for a nearby park. There was a large park. Even at noon the park was full of people. Most tree benches were occupied with people. At the end with least shade one was empty. The exam had already tired me out a great deal. With all the food stalls nearby, I felt quite hungry. I spent all my savings leaving only a small amount of money. However, that was enough to buy spicy puffed rice. At that moment a teenager came toward me. She had some flower necklace on her hand, assembled on a wooden stick. "Sis. Will you take one?"

At the park there are many flower sellers. The flower necklace is very cheap. However you cannot buy from every one of them. As a result they often desperately ask you to buy one. I was not interested in buying one. If it was a single flower, I could hide it somehow until I reached home. For a flower necklace, If I tried to hide them, they would be out of shape. If I take them normally, another story would be born about me receiving gifts from someone. I had no choice but to reject it.

"Sis. Please take one. It will look beautiful on you."

As I tried to walk away, she persisted more. The people around me started to look at us. As always they started to judge. But, what's funny is that they judged both of us. The girl for being stubborn to sell, me for not being such a cheap necklace even for helping her. I rejected harshly. My voice got covered under another person shouting to another seller. As before, that person started to say words to her which we won't say in general. The seller said something in reply and the people around gathered shouting at her. As the chaos increased, the girl in front me rushed there and took the other seller out of there by force. They ran quite far from there. The other people started their annoyance towards the stubborn seller. At that moment, I realized that I was not the only victim and somehow satisfied by what they said. I lost my appetite and started to walk around the park. I was walking on my own and suddenly a car rushed and somehow stopped in front of me. The sudden shock made me lose my balance and fall on the floor. When they own a rich car, are others lives quite a joke to them? Like before the people came and started

badmouthing the owner. I happily did so too, just the difference was, I did that in my mind. Not too later some people came forward, saying what actually happened. It seemed another car overtook this one recklessly by forcing this car in a situation like this. As they knew the truth both the people and the lenses of the phone vanished instantly. As the car owner left, I went a bit inside the park to find a bench. I felt there was a bad scratch in my hand, but I could not bring that up anyway. I tried to wash the dirt off with the small water in my bottle.

“That’s quite a bad wound,” said the seller girl from before. The other girl was still with her. The other girl brought a bottle of water and helped till the dirt was gone. Then they left again trying to sell the flower. Similarly people were annoyed. Hours passed, they could hardly sell five or six necklaces. Both of them again came to rest under a tree.

“Today’s sale is too low. I hope in the evening we can sell enough.” asked one of them to the other.

“We will. Hey. I saw a lot of fallen periwinkle over there. Let’s collect some and make a necklace.”

“But that area has too many guards. If they see us collecting the flowers, we will be beaten like before.”

The girl sighed. The very moment she took a deep breath saying, “ We can collect them from behind. Also we will only take the fallen one. Let’s pray everything goes well.”

“Pink or white.”

“We can ask for a review from someone. Sis?”

“Hmm?”

“You have been here all the time!! Which colored periwinkle flower would you like more.”

“Let. . . Let’s see. A. . . a mixed one.”

Both of them seemed baffled. They seemed more baffled as I asked their permission to make some necklace with them. Somehow I got their permission. They collected from behind, while I left to collect from the front side. For visitors it was alright as long as I didn’t tear any. The whole afternoon we made enough to cover two sticks. Before leaving, they told me to pick any. However, I bought two from each of them. As they started their sale in the busy late afternoon, the scenery from noon did not change. What changed was just the probability as more people were there. Their enthusiasm made me envy how strong they were!!

The bus standing at the station was empty. Leaning on the back of the chair, I counted the moments before departure. The bus was too quiet that day. I kept staring through the window of the passing world. Between the grasses there are small dots like flowers. Some of the places were holding a vine type plant clinging to the ground with small round leaves. They were present in many parts of my regular way but for the first time I noticed them. When I looked above- I found a clear blue sky with many white clouds. Clouds moving with the wind and the cotton like textures against the blue. The longer I stared the lighter my mind got. I didn't get the concept of distant sky. It was the peak hour in the evening. So there was too much traffic creating a long line. The chaotic city snatched my concentration from the sky or the ground. A group of people crossing the road hurrying before the light turns green, a high speed motorcycle trying to win the life race in the traffic jam, a group of students walking while talking irrespective of the people around, a child screaming to buy a toy from the roadside after being ignored by its parents. No way the sky was distant. This chaotic city was, till the extent it felt unbearable. It makes me wish either they are gone or myself. That moment a child shouted by the window, 'fried peanut, fried corn, cold water', it repeated saying that. I turned around to find a boy about twelve to thirteen years old, selling a bottle of cold water to the student behind me. The bus in the traffic jam felt more hot as the cool air stopped with the speed. I was thinking of buying one and checked my bag's outer pocket for the money. At that moment the signal turned green. The boy was still waiting to get the money for the water sold. The student behind me hurried and threw the money from the window as the bus speeded. I saw the child collect it from the ground. It is better not to look at the surroundings. The more you look, the more you see the cruelty. The crazy traffic again caused another signal a bit further. I again heard the shouting voice. But not the selling product name but shouting, 'Sis, sis.' he returned her a note of 30. For a bottle of cold water it cost 20. That means the student behind me deliberately threw a note of 50 to at least pay for the water bottle. Again my world shattered. I wondered what I would have done in her stead. This time both had a warm smile on their faces. The private cars standing nearby were visited by many hawkers. A middle aged woman with handmade mittens, an old man with car decors, an old woman with bent back from aging still walking with the help of a stick to earn something for food. Their life seemed tough but far better than those unbearable chaos. The traffic made the whole journey a bit faster then again paused. The wide divider had many spots without any plants. At such a place there was a family sitting on an old stained sheet. They were assembling some bright fresh white flowers in a necklace. Beside the parents a small figure happily sleeping. The red top and messy haired girl was the one from whom I bought a flower necklace one evening. As the signal changed the colour, the old man selling car decors sat on

the long divider's corner, with clear drops of sweat on his face. The old woman with the stick struggled to balance while walking. The woman selling the mittens was in the middle of the street as the car started running. She ran through those speedy cars, reaching to the divider with total uncertainty of life. As one sitting there warned her to be cautious, she glanced at them and gave the happiest smile like winning against the whole world. The long awaited traffic jam was finally dismissed after crossing some signals. The buses and cars started to compete to reach faster than the others. At one stoppage a local bus came beside our students' bus. The conductor started to shout the name of the stoppage. He had a big injury on his left hand, still tightly grabbing the steel gate to get passengers. As the passengers unboarded, one had a very harsh tone while talking. Based on other passengers' comments, the conductor was not at fault. Generally when I board a local bus many conductors have rude language while many have very warm tones. The one standing next to our bus seemed like neither. He neither shouted back nor seemed hurt. His age would be around us. When another passenger boarded the bus, they joked about something making a corner of the expressionless face an unnoticeable smile.

Don't blindly devour everything you listen to. There is no proper definition of anything in life. I get what Skyler meant. The regular route till my stop seemed longer. Everywhere there was a story whose only some seconds were known to me. Skipping the unbearable surroundings made me skip many things. While I refused to keep going, comparing the happiness and the nonsensical surroundings, I missed those struggling stories that made myself feel hopeless. With nothing they have the courage to stand in the killing speed, happiness to sleep under the sun, care of assembling the fragile flowers, strength to work even depending on lifeless sticks, confidence of being just, honesty of others right. My comparison of the surroundings made me get away from them as I kept comparing the things that the world said better. But, when did I forget, in those things or lives that the world doesn't bother to consider so important, is the reality to find how weak and immature my thoughts and acts are? I was still living. So no doubt I had a lot of reality that drained my spirit. Some of them must be more horrible than others. But the others rest some of their problems could be horrible than mine.

Once I felt those thoughts in chaos. When?? I don't quite remember. I could assure it was before the days turned that much creepy. In the evening when the power supply was cut, I had to search for the coil packet under the layer of dust. The smoky smell of the red mosquito coil surrounded the room. Back in childhood this smell meant daily afternoon or evening scheduled load shedding guaranteed with a round meeting on the yellow mat, either all together or by booking the corridor for the children gang. Visiting the corridor accompanied by the light smell there was a star in the sky clearly visible. That sky had more of an orangish hue. It was

Betelgeuse, a giant supernova. I could easily recall many memories from my childhood, way before meeting my school closest buddies. Those memories flooded over the evening and early night making the environment silent by midnight. The half dried flower necklaces were left on my table. Right then I opened the drawer untouched for more than two years. Beside the diary there were some toys, bands, cards, drawings and many things. Pages of playing bingo, tic tac toe, paper cricket when my handwriting was still unsteady. The inkless golden pen that was super popular one time, a keychain. Hours passed while rummaging those old pieces of memories and finally I took the diary.

## **Chapter 20**

### **The Forgotten Diary**

A book store near that school, whose buildings and uniforms are still the same. Only the students changed. The book store still sells the same covered notebooks, scale, geometry box. However the pen, pencil box and diary changed in design. Long ago the book store had six diaries with the same black pattern on the cover, resting in the front glass shelf. The students with the same uniform as today, went there, each placed a bunch of notes of money of 10 or 20, collected skipping the tiffin. The kind store owner gladly sold those gorgeous covered diaries with a great discount. A cheer for joy flooded the whole store. With such a joyful smile, as if winning against the world rule, the store owner bade them. Those students ran towards the playground, tore the reflecting covers and decided which one would suit them. One of them got the aquamarine colored one, still resting in one drawer, holding thousands of stories in it.

The dairy had a yellow and black pen attached in one corner. The ink ended long ago. It was a gift from Naira, she gave it to me on the day we bought the diary. The first few pages were the dried ink in letter shaped in the diary. Untying the ribbon belt, I opened the diary. It started from a day eleven years ago. Every page had different writings. Those days were silly but precious.

“25 March

I and Naira curved a potato in teddy bear shape in home economics block printing class. However, we could not print it on the piece of cloth we had to submit. Who would do that to get scolded? We took a different piece and printed some designs. The idea spread throughout the classroom. The designs got weirder and weirder. I am hiding my extra piece of cloth. I ruined it is a secret for now. I will have to face an interrogation during final exam.”

“5 June

The drawing class test topic was museum. The only exam that doesn’t have guards or restrictions in an exam hall. Our teacher also lets us do anything unless we cheat by exchanging papers. The crayon would never get to return to their respective kingdom. All our crayons get mixed. We just checked if we had the number correct. Rest will be unknown for eternity. It’s more like a festival than an exam. We had our secret code engraved in our drawings.”

“06 July

A sudden thunderstorm and a power cut. Class was canceled. No one cared about the warning to

remain indoors. After all, the teacher can not notice the exact face of anyone while standing on the second floor. For the first time, I got to see what a storm looks like. The dark sky. The rough wind is taking light things too far. Seems like our debate on FIFA went equally wild as storm.”

“06 August

First class after festival break. On this best day of school, we attend class without a uniform. Today we six planned to attend the class at all costs. Other friends also dressed in the festival special dress. Teachers gave us the freedom to talk or play anything. Just the camera is not allowed in the class. I took the books for the class. Heh, I got one point extra than the whole class.”

“10 September

The whole section played a musical chair. Oronna won. Later we had to rearrange the classroom again. Staying in the classroom during the breaktime is getting tougher. They turned the classroom in their own outdoor to play games.”

“05 October

We had a class test. But the tiffin time cannot be wasted on tests. I went to the canteen, but returned a bit late. The teacher of that period gave the punishment to stand outside the class. Though the preparation of the later period test was horrible, it was not that bad to stand outside the classroom when everyone in the school was inside their classes. The view from the 5th floor, the sky, the school building, the roof of the opposite side building without a crowd was mesmerising.”

“18 November

Aria made a cake for all of us at the last class before the final exam. It had a white icing with pink designs. Adira also bought a cake with our name written with chocolate. Their cakes had two different vibes. However both tasted equally great.”

“2 January

Aria, Hina and I are in the same section this year. But our classroom is a bit far from other sections.”

“5 February

I missed class but those kids didn't bother to update me. Their update was enough to believe I missed the whole year's fun.”

“20 April

We had a programme. We cousins matched the dress colour and took crazy photos. We took a fresh red rose from the decoration, hoping to grow a plant. My idea failed every time. Let’s wait to see this time.”

“24 July

Sis made some drawings she loved. They were so beautiful. However, she deliberately gave me half of them as a gift. I also got a can of fruit candies. I won’t lie, if I was her, I wouldn’t have the heart to share such drawings.”

“17 August

We bring one practice book to English class almost every day. That’s the only way to gossip in class with excuses of sharing books. However, today we bought one for eight people.”

“3 November

Junior school final exam. Our discussions after exams are more like scholars of each subject. How funny. It’s almost winter. Many colourful butterflies often fly near the window during exams.”

“5 January

The first step to choose which path to take in life is placed. I never wish for something like this again. Saba will be in the same section as me this year too.”

“9 April

Anaya seems to have attained school properly again. However, it is unlikely to find her in her classroom everyday.”

“10 May

After P.E. class we have our math class. The math teacher is really strict. Throughout my high school life I knew he was strict as others said. This year is my first time attending his class. Believe me, he must be strict. But he will punish us for the slightest reason, it was a whole lie. He would allow you till the time you need to return from the field. As there is no break between two classes except tiffin time, we are bound to return before P.E. class ends. Still he allowed extra time to return to class. If we willingly return later standing outside of the class is a must. For the first time I felt that staying in a classroom without any specific group of friends can also feel good.”

“9 August

A tour to the famous spot with cousins and family. The rain didn't want to miss any part of our tour.”

“14 November

Last class party of school life. Adira and I were part of the decorating team. The black and golden themed balloons would be the last order for the every year party. This black forest cake is the last class party cake.”

“23 February

Mahu bought a guitar for the upcoming program rehearsal. Between the class gap she sang some popular songs. I don't think I will ever love the real version of those songs more than hers.”

“5 March

I agree with Ilma that Ruhi mam really is awesome. I wish one day I would be like her.”

“9 October

Last class of secondary school. The diary writings for keeping each other in memory were already making it hard to keep up. Hina took my diary to write something precious that day. After the class a countdown of the last moment. The last two years of hard work as a silent girl, destroyed with the tears at that moment.”

“10 October

The official final class. The morning assembly started with announcing the day by releasing the colorful balloons and the banner of the day. Who knew the event of every batch we would watch from the corridor, since we were preschoolers would be our one day too.” I could not shift those pages easily. It was making the line hard to read as the pages turned hazy over and over again. I forgot such detailed days. Even some moments are there, I cannot recall even with all those details.

“5 May

End of final exam of secondary school. The exam center was a different school. However they didn't bother how long we stayed today. Aria and Naira left. Hina had a different date of exam as we were in different sections. Anaya went with some other friends to the nearby cafe. Before going we all bade each other in that uniform for one last time. The area turned very silent in a few moments. I, Adira and Dima were left. We went to the corner of the playground with

seesaws, slides and other games. For a long time we played, sang the song ‘Coffee house’ while getting the red soil of that playground on our blue and white clothes, till we bade each other.”

The diary had some dried Baby breaths’ in designed wrapping paper of secondary school farewell and higher secondary school freshers reception.

“19 July

Many of our friends shifted to a different school. Hina and Anaya too. Though I told Adira that I will contact her during admission to be in the same section, I hesitated calling farther. What have I done!! However Adira did not mind and our section was different. The teachers said today, if we try hard for these two years the rest of our life would be better. Something similar was once stated at the start of secondary school. But this time they seem serious. Who cares, I don’t have much to do in school, so books are the only thing I can pass time with and avoid ‘why don’t you talk?’, ‘ She is too good to be around us’, blah blah.”

After that the days only had stories of class test exams and a bunch of proof of my efforts I gave, believing their theory for just two years. After two more months there were no more irregular updates. It was a once or twice a month note with language with no similarity with the regular one before. It felt like the diary was written by two completely different people. More weird was, there were hardly one or two lines in those days.

“31 January

My day of college picnic. To be honest I am not quite interested. Lia is also going, so maybe it’s ok. But tonight, sis will leave for another city. Not for one or two days. Which one is more important?”

“3 March

Before class starts I usually get 20 or 25 minutes to stand before the large window in front of our classroom in the west building. The tiffin break is mostly passed in the textbook section of the library. Today I could not focus. When did things turn out like this? How can someone be like this all of a sudden? Or was it always like this with a facade? I went to the 5th floor, where the 7th grade classroom was. However, a different level uniform was making it awkward. I went to the north-east building corner of the 5th floor. Though in other floors it is basically a common room, this floor is still free. Some broken benches were left here and there. There was another girl without a uniform. No wonder she won’t bother if I stand there. When I stood in the corner facing the large window towards the playground, she came to me and talked about my class, why I was there completely opposite to my class room. Her name is Skyler. She talked about the

recent cartoon series broadcast on the channel that opened in two years, the black kitten in the canteen and so on. She promised that I can talk to her anytime.”

Skyler!!! I regained the courage to keep reading that boring diary.

“10 February

After school Lia and Zara talked about their upcoming drama performance. Though they laughed at their own performance, I admired them. After they left I said to Skyler that I loved their play and their courage to perform in front of the whole school. To be honest, back in fifth grade we made a five person group for a drama. Though it was not selected for the final presentation. Skyler proposed an idea to try to perform it ourselves. It was so nice. The name ‘Rain of dew’, means the upcoming ending season of winter of the higher secondary school that started last rainy season.”

“12 February

Today I got to talk to Skyler. I told her how people think she is an illusion. People kept saying I am suffering from psychological issues, that I am creating an imaginary character. It did not take long to circulate till school. The people in school came to pity that being alone made me to be like this. How absurd?”

Yes, Skyler was the girl that made me skip the shadow for the time being. Not only that, she was the one who I could talk to whenever I wish to. She was there every time I had to participate in the group chat to make me feel like I also exist. With her, I could skip the reality of whether a classroom or a program being alone is getting pointed out and being with others is more of a bother to ignore till I leave. From secondary school, I started to keep my distance. Even from my beloved friends. I was mostly either a heartless person or a queen from the tragedy story. I preferred neither. The outcome was expected. But there was a note written in bright blue color, “Don’t think you are a loner. You have me to talk to. Not only me, the wind, the vine, the sparrow and many more are out there to talk to you. Don’t give up.”

—Skyler

Suddenly another day popped up with a detail of the day. The details were too painful to read. However one line was, “Had I known, finally becoming able to talk and plan again even with just three of them after these years, will end with a sudden lockdown by evening, no class tomorrow, without the farewell we long planned with the matching colour dresses, I would rather read those heavy textbooks in the last bench than trying hard to make a beautiful memory of the end.”

That farewell never came. After a year when we returned to take the necessary documents it was the end of our higher secondary school. Everyone changed. Why won't they be? We all were stupid to blindly trust that life will be like that for two years only. Life never gets better. It gets harder and harder. So was the diary. No more text was there. Throughout the lockdown and the following time it had only pictures drawn with date in one corner. Oddly enough, each picture was enough to recall my days. When words are better not left with proof, it was the means I got. Some of them was,

April

A picture of hazy brown soap followed by a hand sanitizer bottle with a broken sip.

May

A picture of some colourful threads by an open scissor, slicing the blue thread horribly.

June

The picture of the blue book I read almost everyday under a glass paper weight, reflecting the clouds in the clear blue sky.

July

A girl wearing a new blue dress combined with black with a smile on her face surrounded by the bright white colour of the page of the diary. As from a little distance from her black clouds were trying to push in to cover the bright whiteness. However two wrapped presents seemed to shield the happiness from the oozing dark.

August

A clear blue sky against the metal railing. Shattered pieces of transparent glass. Some with hazy design, some against a green meadow, some with red strained corners, some against blue sky.

September

A blue and red ink strained page of some notebook.

October

A figure with a gray dress, drawing on a blackboard.

November

Some black figures eating the white page The image of some fallen dry leaves under a paw. The same dry leaves soaked in the rain.

Again some notes. No it was no more legible. As if full of scribbles. However the notes were covered with some weird brown strains. Shifting another page, the things fall in pieces. The page didn't feel bothersome at that moment. But staring at it for some seconds the feeling of suffocation returned. The corner of the page was a bit torn. As if some tried to tear it before. As I flipped it to tear, a note popped in the following page,

"Keep it.

—Skyler"

I turned to the later page. There was another note, "You say you hate 'Maybe'. Then you better live. At least you know it will either be peaceful or painful as it was till now. Once you die you don't know anything. You cannot even predict the 'Maybe'. So, live."

I recall all of it . When did I lose Skyler? I still wander alone. Maybe, I met Skyler often but I rarely felt her as things turned better. Now that the black clouds were pushing in, the same drama was trying to restage, I got my sense back and met her.

More pictures kept rushing through the white sheet wave. A slice of cake with peanut topping, small blue humans, a rail line with a figure standing far, a whale and so on. The last page before the pages never been touched had a song. More like a poem written by someone with no sense of poetry. However the meaning felt different.

Looking above, I searched in the clouds  
Those dreams We once entrusted them to.  
I wondered if those dreams drifted  
Like the petals from the center sifted.

Now that I can't keep going,  
I searched those silly days, but  
A sudden thunder danced between,  
Scattering the colorful myriad.  
A piece of glass engraved with the sign  
We swore to hold till we die.

When the glass of hopes and dreams  
Shattered, changing the colors within,

I walked on the sharp knife of glass.  
No path remained to turn around.

They say: "It's alright — keep going."  
They claimed to walk the same beam —  
But the road showed no footprints.  
Only dark staining.

Turn around — See, I've been with you.  
I know a story That's truly new.  
Each step on the shattered piece  
You made the edges more piercing.

An unknown figure walked the field,  
Full of scars, blamed for guilt,  
A different path through that same glass —  
Beauty that hurts.

When they touched the same piece as you,  
The crystal turned to a different hue —  
A hopeful curve through their face,  
Grasping tightly through the glaze.

Oh my friend, You traveled further,  
Without the glimpse of the hope shared.  
I don't know if we catch sight out there,  
But let me tell a secret before despair:

The challenge of mazes was just a draft  
Of our paths in this life apart.  
All the paths will meet at end  
Please give me the chance to meet you

at the final bend.

## **Chapter 21**

### **Another Season**

The realm in which a human breath has varied colour. As the night passed the sky changed its colour. The black gradually changed to dark gray to spinel blue to deep blue and finally the sky blue. The diary absorbed the whole night. The half dried periwinkle flower dried out by then.

I recalled not assembling the previous semester books correctly last night. As I was sequencing them I found the dried grass flower Skyler gifted me last semester. It was still in perfect shape. Without wasting time further, I ran to the mansion. There is a giant mango tree behind the building, near the staircase. One corner of the roof was filled with fallen mango buds, soaked in rain water. The strong fragrance of the mango bud was assuring the arrival of the summer. No wonder, there must have been a nor'wester last night. Surprising me from behind she asked, "What are you looking at so enthusiastically?"

"At the promise of absorbing beauty, at the lowest."

The glance fixed at me gave the softest smile saying, "Oh dear, someone finally recalled."

No grudge, no mockery. I got the chance back to talk to someone. No limitation, no hesitation. I kept babbling about the black clouds pushing me the whole time. No advice, no nagging, she listened to everything. Even when I could not communicate eye to eye she kept looking and listening as if something serious was being discussed. It felt much better after talking about those days. As my story ended, she asked, "Then now what will you do? You recall everything now."

"At least for now I am living. I don't know about tomorrow,"

"That's it. You don't have to be alive tomorrow. Not even today."

"Hmm?"

"Please be alive now. The moment I pronounce 'now', this moment ends, starting a new moment. No need to live the life, nor to enjoy it. Live the moment, whether you enjoy it or not. The moment you misplace your foot and lose balance, it might be painful. But it will pass. If you try to skip the slip you will also miss the chance to smile while standing and dusting the dirt."

"Even if the moment is enough to lose breath?"

"Yes. Even then. You live it. If it has to be the end you have no choice, but if it is not, be alive till the next one. Whether more painful or peaceful. Can you?"

“I can not promise.”

“You don’t have to. It’s a task that can only be done at a moment that is passing.. No one else on this earth can take a forceful promise for it.”

“I see. After all, real life is no novel or drama series that at the end of the day you will get a friend circle worth saving you from fear. Anyway I would rather stay like this than be around humans. I wish someone could save me from those humans around me.”

“Well, I cannot save you from those around you. However, as long as you are willing to, I will save you from you.”

Save me from me. Yes, saving from humans will end me up in the same ending. I needed someone to save me from me, who hated and feared my existence the most. Our chat rolled for hours after hours on the familiar roof. The whole universe got to attend the conversation.

“Remember you once told me, I was more like the star that keeps hiding behind the clouds. Maybe I am not. Stars may seem to twinkle but they keep shining. Not for just this moment.”

“Yes. Let me amend it. Be nova, not star.”

“...”

“Do you know what nova is?”

“I did read. However, I forgot.”

“A white dwarf is always there, shining faintly, too dim for our eyes. But sometimes it takes gas from a nearby star, and that gas flares up , bright and sudden, then quietly fades again. That’s a nova: a star that appears out of nowhere, then disappears just as suddenly.”

Yes. That’s what nova is. They keep living without being noticed as being alive. Still from time to time they get the chance to inhale a gust of inspiration to shine brightly. Just like I got to devour the breeze weighted with the wet mango bud fragrance. With every breath, I gained the strength to move a step forward with a smile which is true. As long as I can hold tight to belief, she taught me, I will live. I wish to live another moment. I am afraid another sudden storm will dust my wish. The ever feared conflict made the smile glow against the sunlight reflecting on tears. The dear friend of mine, slowly came and embraced me. I felt as if the new or old painful wounds dried in an instance, though the scars are left. Just one more, please. Maybe a day, a week or . . .

“Skyler, I wish to breathe another season.”