

The Ghost's Love Story

By

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Chapter 1: The Boredom

I've been in this room for 27 years. Same walls. Same window. Same crack in the ceiling that looks like a woman's face if you squint at 3 AM, which I do, every night, because what else is there to do?

The flat is in Malviya Nagar, Delhi. Third floor. 2 BHK. Rent keeps going up. Tenants keep leaving. I stay.

There's a story about how I died—exorcism gone wrong, priest's fault, screaming, blood on the walls. But honestly? I don't remember much. Just the feeling of being stuck. Like someone tied a rope around my chest and forgot to let go. 27 years later, the rope's part of me now.

I've tried everything to leave. Meditation (didn't work). Anger (didn't work). Possessing the neighbor's dog and running into traffic (the dog survived, I came back). Nothing works.

So I haunt.

Badly.

The last tenant was a software engineer named Aditya. Worked 14-hour days. Came home drunk. Passed out on the couch. I'd throw books at him—one landed on his face and gave him a nosebleed. He thought it was a stroke. Left the next week. Didn't even call the landlord.

Before him, there was Mrs. Sharma. Widow. Prayed constantly. I'd make the lights flicker during her prayers. She just lit more candles. After six months, she moved to her son's place in Gurgaon. Said the flat had "good energy."

Good energy.

I'm the worst haunter in Delhi.

The flat's been empty for three weeks now. Just me and the silence and the crack in the ceiling that looks like a woman's face. Sometimes I talk to it. "We're still here," I tell the woman. "Still waiting." She never answers. But at least she listens.

Today, I hear footsteps on the stairs.

Heavy. Slow. Someone's dragging luggage. The footsteps stop outside my door—our door—the flat's door. A key slides into the lock.

My heart would race if I had a heart.

New tenant.

I move to the corner of the room, the way I always do when someone new arrives. Wait. Watch. Plan. There's this moment, right before they see me—or feel me—when they're still just a person with hopes and dreams and a lease agreement. I like that moment. It's the last moment before they realize they've made a terrible mistake.

The door opens.

She's small. Young. Carrying a backpack that's bigger than her. Behind her, a man in kurta—probably landlord or father—drags a suitcase that's seen better decades.

"The top floor's quieter," the man says. "You'll like it."

She doesn't respond. Just walks in. Looks around the flat the way people do when they're already calculating how to make it theirs. Eyes on the windows. The light. The crack in the ceiling.

She doesn't see me.

Of course she doesn't. I'm air now. Memory. The thing that makes the room feel cold at 2 AM.

"Rent's 15,000," the man says. "Water bill separate. Don't complain about noise from downstairs—that's on you. And..." He hesitates. "The previous tenant left because of, uh, personal reasons. But the flat's fine. Nothing wrong with it."

Nothing wrong with it.

I want to laugh. But ghosts can't laugh—we can only make sounds that terrify people, and even that's exhausting.

The girl nods. Takes the keys. The man leaves. She stands alone now, in the middle of my room, and I realize: she's not scared. Not even cautious. Just tired. The kind of tired that comes from carrying everything you own and having nowhere else to go.

She sits on the floor—not unpacking, just sitting—and pulls out her phone. Scrolls. I drift closer, curious. In 27 years, I've learned to read screens from a distance. It's a skill I never wanted.

Her name is Priya. 26 years old. From Bangalore. Moved to Delhi three days ago for a job that starts Monday. The flat is cheap because it's cursed, but she doesn't know that yet.

She orders food on Zomato. Chai and samosas.

Then she lies down on the bare floor—no mattress, no blanket—and stares at the ceiling. At the woman's face in the crack.

"Hello," she whispers to it. "Looks like we're going to be friends."

I freeze.

Did she just talk to the crack in the ceiling like it was a person?

The food arrives. She eats sitting cross-legged on the floor. Doesn't explore the flat. Doesn't unpack. Just eats chai and samosas and stares at the walls like she's memorizing them.

By 10 PM, she's asleep on the floor.

I hover above her, waiting for the fear to set in. It always does. They always figure it out—the cold spots, the shadows, the way things move when no one's touching them.

But she's just sleeping. Peaceful. Like she's exactly where she needs to be.

I've never seen a new tenant sleep peacefully on their first night.

Around midnight, I try. I push a book off the shelf. It lands near her head.

She doesn't wake up.

I try again. Another book. This time, it lands on her face.

She opens one eye. Looks at the book. Looks around the empty room. Then she picks up the book, reads the spine—"The Stranger by Camus"—and goes back to sleep with it under her head like a pillow.

Camus. Of all books.

The book about alienation. About not belonging. About going through life like a ghost even when you're alive.

I sit in the corner all night, watching her sleep, and for the first time in 27 years, I wonder: What if she doesn't leave?

What if she stays?§

What if someone, finally, just stays?

Chapter 2: The Crack's New Friend

She wakes at 6:15.

Not because of an alarm. Not because the room is bright.
Just—awake. Eyes open, staring at the ceiling. At the crack shaped
like a woman's face.

"Morning," she says to it.

Then she gets up.

I've watched a lot of people wake up in this room. They always do the same thing: check their phones first. Scroll for five minutes. Pretend they're not dreading the day. But Priya just stands, walks to her backpack, pulls out a water bottle, and splashes some on her face. No mirror. No fuss. Hair gets finger-combed into something presentable. She disappears into the bathroom.

I hear the tap running. The flush. Normal sounds.

When she returns, she sits on the floor and opens her backpack. Take things out one by one. A steel dabba with leftover samosa crumbs. A notebook with a broken spine. A photo frame—facedown. She doesn't flip it over. Just slides it into the drawer of the old desk no one's used in years.

Then she gets dressed. Pulls on jeans. A clean kurta. Checks her phone—7:02 AM. Grabs the backpack and leaves.

The door clicks shut.

I'm alone again.

But it feels different. The room still smells like chai and fried dough. There's an indent on the floor where she slept. Her water bottle's still by the window.

Someone lives here now.

I drift over to the drawer. Try to open it. Can't. My fingers—if you can call them that—just pass through. I've been dead 27 years and I still forget.

The notebook's inside. I saw the cover before she put it away. Plain brown paper. No title. Just a rubber band holding it together.

I wonder what she writes in there.

She comes back at 6:30 PM.

Exhausted. Backpack dragging. Kurta sticking to her back from sweat. She drops everything by the door, sits on the floor, and just breathes for a minute.

Then she pulls out her phone. Orders food. Don't unpack. Doesn't change. Just sits there, staring at the ceiling.

"Rough day?" she says to the crack.

I wait. Maybe she's on the phone. But no—she's just talking. To the ceiling. To the woman's face in the plaster.

"Office was fine. People were fine. Everything's fine." She says 'fine' like it's a curse. "But Delhi's... loud. You know?"

The crack doesn't answer. Obviously.

But she keeps talking anyway.

"Bangalore was different. Quieter. Or maybe I just knew where to hide." She pulls her knees to her chest. "Here, I don't know the hiding spots yet."

Food arrives. She eats sitting cross-legged in the same spot. Dal and rice this time. Eats slowly. No TV. No music. Just her and the woman in the ceiling.

I move closer. Not to scare her. Just to see.

She's tired. The kind of tired that's not about sleep. I remember that feeling. Back when I was alive. When everything was too much and also not enough.

I try something small. Push the Camus book off the shelf. Gentle. It lands next to her.

She looks at it. Picks it up. Turns it over in her hands.

"You again," she says.

Not to me. To the book. Like it fell on purpose. Which it did, but she doesn't know that.

She flips through the pages. Stops on a random one. Reads silently. Then closes it and sets it on top of her backpack.

"Thanks," she says.

To who? The room? Me? The ceiling?

I don't know.

But she goes back to eating, and I stay there, floating two feet away, wondering if she felt anything.

Three days pass.

Same routine. Wake up. Talk to the crack. Leave. Come back. Talk to the crack. Sleep.

She doesn't unpack much. A few clothes in the drawer. A toothbrush by the bathroom sink. That's it. No posters. No decorations. Like she's not sure she's staying.

But she keeps talking to the ceiling.

Sometimes it's small things. "Traffic was hell today." "Forgot my lunch." "Saw a dog on the metro. Made my day."

Other times, it's heavier. "I don't know why I came here. Everyone said Delhi would be good for me. Fresh start. New city." A pause. "But it feels the same. Just louder."

I start to recognize her patterns. The way she sits in the exact same spot every night. The way she holds her phone but doesn't scroll—just stares at the lock screen. The way she says "goodnight" to the crack before lying down.

On the fourth night, I try again.

This time, I move the book while she's awake. Slide it across the floor. Just a little. Enough to notice.

She stops mid-sentence. Looks at the book. Looks around the room.

"Drafty," she says.

Drafty.

Not haunted. Not cursed. Drafty.

She picks up the book. Sets it on the shelf. Goes back to eating.

I want to scream. But ghosts can't scream—not in a way that makes sense. We can moan, maybe. Make the air cold. Rattle things. But actual screaming? That takes a body. Lungs. Vocal cords.

I have none of those.

So I just hover there, in the corner, feeling useless.

A week in, she brings home a mattress.

Not a new one. A thin, rolled-up foam thing she probably got from a street vendor. She drags it up three floors, sweating and swearing under her breath in Kannada.

Unrolls it under the window. Right under the crack.

"Better," she says, lying down.

She's still talking to the ceiling. But now she's comfortable.

That night, she pulls out the notebook. The one from the drawer. Sits cross-legged on the new mattress and writes. I can't see what. Just her hand moving, fast, like she's been holding it in all day.

She writes for an hour. Then closes the notebook. Tucks it under the mattress.

Lies down. Stares at the crack.

"I think someone died here," she says.

I freeze.

"The landlord didn't say it. But I can tell. Rooms feel different when someone's died in them." She turns on her side. "It's okay, though. I don't mind."

She closes her eyes.

I stay in the corner all night, watching her breathe.

On the tenth night, there's a storm.

Rain hammering the windows. Thunder shaking the walls. Power cuts out. The room goes black except for the glow of her phone.

She lights a candle. One of those small emergency ones. Sets it on the floor.

Then she sits up, wraps her arms around her knees, and waits.

I make the candle flicker. Just once. Test.

She watches the flame. Doesn't flinch.

I do it again. Harder. The flame nearly goes out.

"I know you're here," she says.

My entire existence goes still.

"I've known since the first night." She's not looking at me. Just at the candle. "You're not very subtle."

I don't move. Don't breathe—not that I can.

"I don't know what you want," she continues. "And I don't know if you can hear me. But..." She pauses. "I'm not leaving. So if you're trying to scare me out, it won't work."

The rain pounds harder.

"I've been scared of worse things than ghosts," she says quietly.

Then she lies back down. Pulls the thin blanket over herself. Closes her eyes.

The candle burns steady.

I stay in the corner, and for the first time in 27 years, I wonder:

§What do I want?

Chapter 3: Rules of Living with Ghosts

By Day Ten, the flat has started remembering what it feels like to be lived in.

Not fully. Not like the years when a family filled it with pressure cookers and school uniforms and someone shouting, "Who used all the gas?" from the kitchen. But the air is different now—less hollow, more occupied. There's always a faint smell of chai leaves near the sink. Two mugs by the window. One chipped, one not.

Only one of them ever gets used.

Priya is late that morning.

She normally wakes before the sun hits the opposite building, but today the light has already climbed halfway up the wall by the time she sits up on the mattress. Her hair is a mess. Her kurta is twisted around her waist. The crack in the ceiling stares down at her like it's disappointed.

"Traitor," she tells it. "You were supposed to wake me."

The crack says nothing. It is, in that way, the perfect roommate.

She fumbles for her phone, squints at the time, and sighs the sigh of someone who is exactly eleven minutes past the point where she should care.

"Okay," she says to the ceiling, to herself, to whoever. "Today we try being organized."

She swings her legs over the mattress and almost steps into me.

Old reflex makes me shift, even though it doesn't matter. She can't trip on what she can't touch. Still, I move back toward the wall, the way you do when someone reaches for the same cup on the table.

Priya pads to the bathroom, half-asleep. Tap runs. Bucket fills. Same routine. But when she returns, towel slung around her shoulders, there's a strange look on her face. Not fear. Not exactly.

More like decision.

She doesn't sit on the mattress. She drags the old desk chair into the empty center of the room, then sits on it sideways, knees up, like a child about to make a plan no one approved.

"All right," she says.

To the crack. To the room. To me.

"We need rules."

There's a pen in her hair. She pulls it out without looking, taps it against her knee, and glances toward my corner. Not directly at me, but close enough that the temperature drops a little on its own.

She notices. Smirks.

"Good," she says. "You're listening."

She gets up, crosses to the desk, and pulls out the plain brown notebook—the one with the rubber band and frayed edges. It has lived in the drawer like a secret guest since she moved in. Today, it comes to the middle of the room.

She sits back on the chair, notebook balanced on one thigh, pen hovering.

For a moment, nothing happens.

The fan clacks overhead in its slow, useless circle. A scooter backfires on the street below. Somewhere in the building, a pressure cooker whistles. The crack in the ceiling watches all of it, the way she has watched every tenant who passed through.

Then Priya writes, in small, uneven letters:

RULES FOR LIVING WITH A GHOST

She underlines it twice. Not neatly.

"Congratulations," she says to the room. "You're real enough for stationery now."

If I had a heart, it would do something awkward.

No priest has ever called me real. No exorcist, no landlord, no hasty tenant packing at midnight. I've been a draft, a story, a problem with the wiring. Now I am a heading in a notebook.

She taps the page with the pen.

"Ground rule," she mutters. "No haunting until after I've had chai."

She writes the first rule down, then pauses.

"Actually, that's too vague. You're going to ignore it."

She sighs, scratches it out, starts again. Her tongue pokes slightly out between her teeth while she writes. It is, and this annoys me, endearing.

The mattress is still on the floor under the window, blanket rumpled, Camus lying open and facedown like it fainted in the

middle of a thought. The room looks halfway between moving in and giving up. Cardboard box in the corner, still taped. Bag of clothes in another. A single steel plate by the sink.

And in the middle of it, Priya, writing rules for someone she can't see.

She reads as she writes, half aloud, half under her breath.

"No cold spots before six A.M. Fair. Don't touch my phone..."

She glances at the backpack where the phone is charging, as if daring me to try.

"The corner by the window is yours..."

I look at the corner by the window. That was mine long before it was hers to offer. But something about the way she says it makes it feel official.

Claimed. Not as a prison, but as a room in a shared flat.

She keeps going, pen scratching against paper, occasionally shaking her wrist when it cramps. Every so often she looks up at the ceiling, as if checking whether the crack approves of the list so far.

"You're the witness," she tells the plaster woman. "In case he pretends he never agreed."

He.

Not it. Not 'whatever is here.' Not 'presence.' He.

It lands heavier than the cold.

I drift closer, until I'm hovering just behind her shoulder. The words on the page are still blurry—distance works differently, now—but I can feel them. They hum faintly in the air, like fresh paint.

"Don't slam doors when I have video calls," she reads, amused.
"Reasonable. Storms don't count, though. I can't blame you for Delhi weather."

She adds something in the margin, a tiny note only she will understand. That, too, hums.

By the time she stops, the page is full.

Some rules are practical: bathroom off-limits, no touching the diya, no moving books while she's reading them. Some are... not.

"I talk to the ceiling because it's easier than talking to people," she reads, softer now. "You get it."

Her pen hesitates on that one before putting a full stop.

"You do get it, right?" she asks, suddenly.

The room waits.

Ten days ago, if someone had said that to me, I would have responded by making the lights flicker, dropping something, playing the part assigned to me by scared landlords and urban legends.

Today, I just stay where I am and let the cold gather gently around her shoulders.

She shivers once, but she doesn't move away.

"Okay," she says, pen tapping again. "I'm putting that as a rule, actually."

She writes another line. I don't need to read it to understand. It sits heavier in the room than the others.

We are lonely. Both of us. We don't have to pretend otherwise in here.

When she's done, she blows on the page like the ink needs help drying. Then she tears the sheet out of the notebook, folds it in half, and stands.

For a second, I think she'll tape it to the wall like a notice. Something dramatic, like a warning sign: THIS FLAT CONTAINS TERMS & CONDITIONS.

Instead, she walks to my corner.

Not the window corner—the other one. The one I thought I'd hidden in. The one with nothing on the floor, no stains on the wall, no nail holes. The corner everyone's eyes slide past when they look around.

She crouches, rests the folded page on the floor there, and pats it lightly. Like leaving an offering.

"Here," she says. "Read when you're free."

She straightens up, stretches, and checks her phone again. She's late. Of course she's late.

"Fine," she tells the crack. "We'll be organized from tomorrow."

She grabs her backpack, ties her hair up with the same pen, and heads for the door. Halfway out, she pauses, hand on the frame.

"Oh, and one more thing," she says without looking back. "If you want me to leave, knock. I mean it."

The door closes behind her.

The flat falls quiet, but it's not empty. There's a piece of paper in my corner with my name written in everything except letters.

Rules. Not for haunting.

For living.

Chapter 4: The Ghost Goes Outside

The idea comes on a Tuesday morning, which is ironic because I haven't cared about days of the week in 27 years.

Priya wakes at 6:15, same as always. Talks to the crack. Splashes water on her face. Ties her hair with the pen. Grabs her backpack and leaves, locking the door twice because Delhi has taught her not to trust a single turn of the key.

I watch from the window.

She walks down the street, phone in one hand, dupatta slipping off her shoulder. A auto-rickshaw honks. She ignores it. Keeps walking. Turns the corner. Gone.

And I'm alone again.

Same walls. Same ceiling. Same crack shaped like a woman who never blinks.

Except today, I can't stop thinking about where she goes.

I know the basics. Office in Connaught Place. Takes the metro. Blue Line. Comes back exhausted every night smelling like photocopier ink and bad coffee. But I don't know it. Haven't seen it. Can't picture her sitting at a desk or talking to coworkers or eating lunch alone on a bench somewhere.

For 27 years, I didn't care where tenants went during the day. They left. I stayed. That was the arrangement.

But Priya is different.

She comes back every night. Talks to me—or talks near me, which is close enough. Leaves me corners and rules and chai cooling by the window. She stays.

And I want to know what she's staying from.

That's when the sparrow lands on the windowsill.

Small. Brown. Ordinary. Pecking at some invisible crumb, head tilting side to side like it's got questions too.

I've seen a thousand sparrows. Ignored most of them. But today, I stare at this one and think:

What if?

I've never tried possessing something alive. Not on purpose, anyway. The neighbor's dog happened by accident—one second I was trying to leave the flat, the next I was inside four legs and a wet nose and panic, and then I blacked out and woke back in my corner with no memory of what happened in between.

The dog survived. Ran into traffic. Came back with a limp.

I didn't try again.

But this sparrow is smaller. Simpler. Just wings and instinct. Maybe I can hold on longer. Maybe I can follow her.

Maybe I can leave.

I drift closer to the window. The sparrow doesn't notice me—animals usually don't, unless I try to scare them, and I'm not trying to scare this one. I'm trying to ask.

Can I borrow you for a few hours?

The sparrow chirps. Hops once. Keeps pecking.

I take that as a yes.

Possession isn't like opening a door. It's like forcing yourself through a crack in a wall that's too narrow for your shape. You have to compress. Fold inward. Push.

It hurts, even though I don't have a body to hurt.

But I push anyway.

The sparrow jerks. Flaps. Tries to fly off the sill, but I'm already halfway inside, tangled in its tiny heartbeat, and—

Oh.

Heartbeat.

I forgot what that sounds like. Feels like. Fast and light and alive, thrumming through hollow bones and feathers and a chest so small I can't believe it holds a whole life.

Breath. I'm breathing. Little sips of air that taste like dust and diesel and morning.

Hunger. Sharp, constant, gnawing. The sparrow was looking for food.

Instinct. Not thoughts, exactly. Just urges. Fly. Eat. Watch for predators. Survive.

And underneath all of it—me. Stretched thin. Holding on.

I flex. The wings respond. Clumsy at first, then smoother.

I hop to the edge of the sill.

Below, the street is waking up. Vegetable vendor setting up his cart. Stray dog limping past. And there—two blocks down—Priya, still walking, still heading toward the metro.

I jump.

For one perfect, terrifying second, I'm falling.

Then the wings catch.

And I'm flying.

Flying is nothing like floating.

Floating is passive. Aimless. You drift because there's nowhere else to be.

Flying is work. Every beat of these wings takes effort. The air resists. Gravity pulls. The sparrow's instincts want to land, to rest, to find food, but I push them down and force the body forward.

Toward her.

I'm not good at it. I veer too far left, almost crash into a shopfront. Overcorrect. Fly too high. My vision is sharper than I remember—colors brighter, movements faster—but also narrower. I can't see the whole street at once. Just slices. Moments.

There. Priya. Blue kurta. Black backpack. Walking fast, weaving through the morning crowd.

I follow.

She doesn't look up. No one does. I'm just another sparrow in a city full of them. Invisible in a different way than I'm used to.

She turns a corner. I bank—too sharp, the world tilts—and nearly hit a wall. Recover. Keep going.

The street narrows. More people now. Bikes. Autos. A bus rumbling past, belching black smoke. I fly higher to avoid it, and suddenly the city opens up below me in a way I've never seen.

Rooftops. Laundry lines. Satellite dishes. Water tanks. Temple flags fluttering in the wind.

Delhi. The same Delhi I died in. But bigger. Louder. More alive.

I forgot how much of the world exists outside one room.

Priya stops at a tea stall. Orders something. The vendor hands her a paper cup. She sips, standing, eyes on her phone.

I perch on a wire above her, wings trembling from the effort of staying still.

She looks tired already. It's only 7 AM and she looks like she's been awake for days.

I want to land on her shoulder. Let her know I'm here. That she's not alone.

But she wouldn't understand. She'd just swat me away.

She finishes the tea, tosses the cup in a bin, and keeps walking.

I follow.

The metro station is chaos.

Bodies everywhere. Pushing, shoving, rushing. The noise is overwhelming—voices, footsteps, announcements crackling through bad speakers. The sparrow's instincts scream at me to leave, to fly somewhere quieter, safer.

But Priya is heading down the stairs, into the underground.

I can't follow her there.

I try anyway.

Dive toward the entrance. The air changes—cooler, staler, fluorescent. My wings falter. The sparrow's body resists, harder now, and I'm losing my grip.

I pull up. Barely. Fly back into open air, gasping in a way ghosts aren't supposed to be able to gasp.

She's gone. Swallowed by the metro. I hover above the entrance, frustrated, tethered.

Maybe I can wait. Follow her when she comes out.

But the sparrow is tired. Hungry. The instinct to eat is louder now, harder to ignore.

I need to land. Just for a minute.

There's a shopfront nearby. Awning stretched over the pavement. I aim for it.

Almost make it.

But there's a ceiling fan.

Mounted on the outside wall, spinning slow, blades dusty and loud.

I don't see it until I'm too close.

The edge of a blade clips my wing.

The world spins.

I'm falling—not flying, falling—and I can't stop it, can't pull up, can't—

The sparrow hits the pavement.

And I'm ripped out.

I snap back into the flat so hard it feels like crashing into a wall.

No body. No heartbeat. No wings.

Just cold, empty air.

I hover in the middle of the room, disoriented, shaking in a way that doesn't make sense for something without muscles.

Outside, through the window, I can barely see the street three floors below.

The sparrow is on the pavement.

Not moving.

Then—wings flutter. Head lifts. It hops once. Twice. Shakes itself off.

Flies away.

I sink to the floor—or what passes for it—and stay there for a long time, staring at the crack in the ceiling.

The woman's face stares back.

"That was stupid," I tell her.

She doesn't disagree.

But the thing is—I felt something. For ten minutes, maybe less, I was alive. Moving. Part of the world again.

And tomorrow, Priya will leave for work.

And there will be another sparrow.

Priya leaves earlier on Wednesday.

The sky is still the dull grey-blue of almost-morning when she locks the door, glances once at the crack, and mutters, "Don't burn the place down," like it's a joke only she finds funny. Then she's gone. Footsteps down the stairs. Gate creak. Street noise swallowing her.

The flat feels heavier without her in it now. Before, absence was the default. Now it feels like something missing.

I drift to the window.

The sill is empty for a few seconds. Then, right on cue, a sparrow lands.

Different one, maybe. Same size. Same restless energy. It pecks at a stain on the concrete like it believes in miracles.

"You again," I say out of habit.

It tilts its head. Hops. Chirps.

I take that as consent.

Possessing a bird for the second time is easier in the way falling is easier the second time. You know what's coming. It doesn't make the impact softer.

Still, I slip into the sparrow quicker.

This time, I brace for the heartbeat. For the rush of instinct, the sudden narrowness of vision. The hunger. The constant scanning for threats.

I brace for it—and it still hits like cold water.

But I hold tighter.

Wings. I flex them. Less wobble today, more control. The body remembers how to fly better than I do.

We jump.

Air catches. Feathers slice through morning.

I angle us downward, toward the street.

From three floors up, the world feels smaller than yesterday. Familiar now. The vegetable cart. The stray dog. The man who always scratches his head before he unlocks his scooter. Priya is already at the end of the lane, walking fast, scarf flying behind her.

I follow.

The city is louder today. Not in volume, in detail. Tires splashing in a puddle left by last night's cleaning truck. A kid crying because his school shoes hurt. Someone frying kachoris, the smell slamming into the sparrow's tiny, greedy brain.

The bird wants to dive at the stall. I pull up.

"We're working," I tell it, as if that matters. "Focus."

It doesn't understand words. It understands tension. My grip tightens. It obeys.

We track Priya all the way to the main road. Traffic is a mess—buses, cars, scooters, an auto going the wrong way because of course it is. She weaves through it with the weary skill of someone who has nearly been hit three times this week and is learning only from near-misses.

I dart above her, staying just ahead. For a second, I imagine what it would look like, if she could see what I see—herself from above, small but determined, moving through a city that doesn't even know her name yet.

Then we reach the metro station.

I know what's coming. The drop in temperature. The crush of bodies. The choking underground air. I can't go inside—not yesterday, not today. But I can get closer.

She disappears down the stairs.

I perch on a wire near the entrance, trying to ignore the sparrow's pulse pounding through its feet.

Today, I don't give up.

I wait.

Delhi moves around me. People stream in and out of the station like the city is breathing through concrete lungs. Overhead, wires

crisscross in messy loops—electric lines, cable TV, internet, everything sewn together in a knot only the birds and the electricians understand.

The sparrow shifts from foot to foot. Wings twitch. Hunger nudges again. There are crumbs on the pavement below.

"Not yet," I think at it. "She'll be back."

It's hard to measure time in a bird. Minutes stretch and jitter. Every sound feels urgent. Every shadow could be a predator.

By the time the first Blue Line train returns her to the station, my grip is starting to slip.

But then—there she is.

Coming up the stairs. Shoulders a little slumped. Face set to "neutral office expression." Same backpack, now heavier with invisible stress.

She blends into the crowd instantly. I nearly miss her.

I launch.

Wings beat, too hard, too fast. I overtake her, circle back, get above her again. She walks toward the bus stop, then changes her mind and keeps walking. Maybe the metro was crowded. Maybe she had a bad meeting. Maybe she's just trying to save thirty rupees.

I follow.

And that's when I make the mistake.

The wire I choose looks like every other wire in Delhi.

Black. Sagging slightly. A loop of it tied around a rusting bracket. A perfect perch with a perfect view of Priya walking past a row of paan shops.

The sparrow lands.

For a split second, everything is fine.

Then a jolt hits.

It doesn't feel like pain, exactly. Pain belongs to flesh. This is... interruption. All at once, every signal in the sparrow's body misfires. Wings seize. Heart stutters. Vision whites out.

The shock doesn't travel through feathers to me. It travels through the strange connection between us. Through my grip on this borrowed body.

The world splits.

For one impossible moment, I am the sparrow and I am myself and I am the wire and I am nothing.

Then I am just me again.

Back in the room.

The snap is harder this time. Like someone yanked the rope in my chest with both hands.

The flat rushes up around me. Walls. Window. Ceiling. Crack. The air is brighter here, somehow. Thinner.

I hover mid-room, disoriented. It takes a second to realize I'm making the lightbulb rattle in its holder. I force myself still.

Through the window, the sky is an ordinary mid-morning pale. No sign of the wire. No sign of Priya. No sparrow.

For a second, I panic.

Then, faintly, from somewhere below, a chirp.

I move to the window.

The sparrow is on a nearby ledge, feathers puffed, head cocked as if trying to remember what just happened. It ruffles itself. Pecks at its wing. Flies off.

Alive. Again.

This time, the exhaustion hits like a wave.

Yesterday, after the fall, I was shaken, but there was a thrill underneath it. A sense of victory: I left. I flew. I saw her world.

Today, there's none of that.

Today, there's a different awareness—heavier, more precise.

The farther I went, the worse the rope pulled. Not physical rope. The one that's been inside my chest since the exorcism-gone-wrong, the one that keeps me tied to this flat. I felt it stretch as I followed her. Felt it strain at the metro. Felt it snap at the wire.

My prison has measurements.

I drift to the ceiling and press my non-existent back against it, right beside the crack's woman's face.

"How far do you think it goes?" I ask her.

She doesn't answer. Of course she doesn't.

"One kilometer? Two? Just to the station?" I keep talking anyway.
Silence needs filling. "Did you ever try? When you died? Or did you
just lie here and accept it?"

Nothing.

The flat hums quietly. Somewhere outside, a scooter backfires. A
pressure cooker whistles in another kitchen. Life. Elsewhere.

Inside, just me.

And a rope I can't see, pulling tight.

Priya comes home later than usual.

By the time the key turns in the lock, the light coming through the
window has gone that particular Delhi evening color—dusty
orange, like the sun is trying to shine through old curtains.

She steps inside, kicks her shoes off, drops her bag without looking
where it falls.

"Long day," she announces to the room.

Her voice is rough around the edges. Tired.

She goes straight to the sink, fills a glass, drinks half in one go.
Then she leans her forehead against the cool tile for a second.

"You ever notice," she says to the crack, "how the days you're
already tired in the morning decide to be even longer, just for fun?"

The crack is a good listener. Better than me, most days.

She straightens, looks around—and frowns.

"You've been... weird today," she says.

For a panicked heartbeat—that-isn't-mine, I think she means she somehow felt me leave. Felt the presence thin. The room emptier.

Then she squints at the corner by the window.

"It's too quiet," she decides. "You didn't drop a single book."

I almost laugh.

Instead, I make the cold gather near the floor by her mattress. Not too much. Just enough.

She notices. Smiles. A small, tired curve of her mouth, but real.

"There you are," she says. "Thought you'd quit."

She sits on the mattress, pulls off her dupatta, and lies flat on her back, staring up at the ceiling.

For a long time, neither of us says anything.

She breathes. I don't.

The crack watches.

Eventually, she lifts one hand and waves lazily at the air above her.

"Hi," she says.

It's such a stupid, simple word. One syllable. People toss it around all day without thinking.

But no one has said it to me in twenty-seven years.

Not like that.

I hover closer. The rope in my chest pulses, a dull reminder.

"Hi," I say back, even though she can't hear me.

The ceiling fan creaks in its mount. The only response.

She closes her eyes.

"I almost fell asleep in a meeting," she admits quietly. "My boss thinks I'm lazy. My mother thinks I'm ungrateful. My landlord thinks I'm desperate. But you—"

She opens one eye, looks at my corner.

"You don't think anything, do you?" She sounds almost envious.
"Must be nice."

I want to tell her she's wrong.

That I think too much. That I spent the morning in a sparrow's body getting electrocuted on a wire just to see where she goes when she leaves me behind.

That I know exactly how far I can go before the world snaps me back.

But I can't say any of that.

So I do the one thing I can.

I stay.

All night, as she drifts in and out of sleep, jerking awake once from a dream with her hand clenching at her chest like something was pulling, I stay in my corner.

Tomorrow, there will be another sparrow.

And I am not done yet.

Thursday morning, I don't wait for a sparrow to come to me.

I go hunting.

Priya leaves at 6:30—earlier than yesterday, muttering something about a presentation. The door clicks shut. Her footsteps fade. I'm already at the window.

There. Two sparrows on the neighbor's balcony, fighting over a grain of rice.

I choose the one on the left. No reason. Just instinct.

The possession is almost smooth now. I'm learning the rhythm—push, compress, fold into the heartbeat. The sparrow jerks once, then settles. I flex the wings.

Three seconds, start to finish.

I'm getting good at this.

We take off before Priya reaches the end of the street. I spot her blue kurta, the backpack bouncing slightly as she walks. I don't waste time. Straight line. No detours.

Today, I'm going all the way.

The metro station is the same crush of bodies and noise, but I don't try to follow her underground. I've learned. Instead, I perch on the station roof and wait.

Eighteen minutes later, she emerges at Rajiv Chowk.

I'm already there.

I followed the metro line from above—rooftops, wires, the tops of buses inching through traffic. The sparrow's wings ache, but I push through it. The rope in my chest pulls tighter the farther I go, but I ignore it.

Connaught Place opens up below like a broken wheel. White colonial buildings circling a park that's more dust than grass. People everywhere—office workers, street vendors, tourists taking selfies in front of fountains that haven't worked in years.

Priya cuts through the chaos with practiced efficiency. Dodges a man selling sunglasses. Steps over a sleeping dog. Doesn't look up.

I follow from above, hopping rooftop to rooftop when the wings get tired.

She stops in front of a building with cracked paint and a sign that says something about "Enterprises" in faded letters. Third floor, according to the board. She shows an ID to the guard and disappears inside.

I perch on a ledge outside a window.

Through the glass, I see cubicles. Flickering tube lights. People hunched over computers. Priya sits near the back, dropping her bag, logging into a desktop that takes three tries to wake up.

This is where she spends her days.

Grey walls. Bad lighting. A calendar on the wall from 2023 that no one's bothered to replace.

I watch her open a spreadsheet. Stare at it. Rub her eyes.

She looks so small in there.

I don't know how long I stay.

The sparrow gets restless. Hungry. There's a wire nearby with other birds—crows, mostly, bigger and louder. They ignore me at first.

Then one doesn't.

It's huge compared to the sparrow. Black, sharp-eyed, territorial. It hops closer, cawing once—a warning.

I try to move. Shift to another ledge.

The crow follows.

Another caw. Louder. Aggressive.

Inside the office, Priya doesn't look up. She's typing something, face blank with concentration.

The crow lunges.

I react too slow—sparrow instincts scream fly, but I'm still thinking like a ghost, like something that can't be hurt.

Wrong.

The crow's beak hits my wing. Pain flares—sharp, immediate, real.
Feathers scatter.

I try to fight back, but the crow is faster, meaner, built for this. It strikes again, claws raking.

The sparrow's body panics. I lose my grip.

For a second, I'm tangled between the bird's terror and my own fading control, and then—

Snap.

I'm back.

Flat. Ceiling. Crack.

The return is violent this time. I slam into the room so hard the windows rattle. A book falls off the shelf. The diya Priya left on the floor tips over—unlit, thankfully.

I hover in the center of the room, shaking.

Through the window, far away, I can barely see Connaught Place. Just a smudge on the horizon.

Too far.

The rope pulled so tight this time I felt it fraying.

I drift to the floor and stay there, silent, defeated.

Outside, somewhere, a sparrow flies away with a torn wing.

Inside, I finally understand.

I can leave the flat. Possess a bird. Follow her through the city.

But I can't stay out there.

The world isn't mine anymore.

It's hers.

And no matter how many sparrows I steal, no matter how far I fly,
I'll always end up back here.

In this room.

Watching her leave.

Waiting for her to come home.

When Priya returns that night, she looks at my corner and frowns.

"You've been busy," she says.

The book is still on the floor. The diya tipped over.

She doesn't ask. Just picks them up, sets them right.

Then she sits on her mattress and says to the crack:

"Bad day for you too?"

I make the air cold.

She pulls her blanket tighter.

"Yeah," she says softly. "Me too."

Friday morning, a sparrow lands on the sill.

I don't move.

Priya is in the bathroom. I can hear the tap running, the bucket filling. Same sounds, same rhythm. She'll be out in three minutes, dressed in four, gone by 6:45.

The sparrow hops closer to the window. Pecks at something. Waits.

I stay where I am.

Not in the corner. Not by the window. Somewhere in between—drifting near the ceiling, eye-level with the crack.

The woman's face stares at nothing, same as always.

"I'm done," I tell her.

She doesn't react. Cracks never do.

"Three days. Three disasters. I can't even make it to her office without something—fan, wire, crow—ripping me out." My voice, if you can call it that, sounds thin. Tired. "What's the point?"

The crack says nothing.

Priya emerges from the bathroom, hair damp, kurta sleeves rolled up. She glances at the window, sees the sparrow, smiles slightly.

"Morning, bird," she says.

The sparrow chirps.

She doesn't know it's been a different one each time. Doesn't know I've been inside them, following her, crashing, burning, failing.

She just sees a bird.

She grabs her backpack, checks her phone, hesitates.

Then she looks up. Not at the window. At the ceiling. At the crack.

"I'll be back," she tells it.

Not me. The crack.

But I hear it anyway.

The door closes. Lock turns. Footsteps fade.

The sparrow is still on the sill.

I don't move toward it.

Instead, I sink lower, until I'm level with the mattress, the desk, the floor. The rope in my chest—the invisible thing that's kept me here for 27 years—sits heavy and present.

I could try again. Possess the sparrow. Follow her one more time.

But I already know how it ends.

Me, back here. Alone. Exhausted.

Her, out there. Unaware.

So I stay.

The morning passes slowly.

I don't haunt. Don't move books or flicker lights or make the air cold. I just exist, the way I have for nearly three decades, drifting between the walls and the ceiling and the corners that have been mine longer than they've been anyone's.

The sun moves across the floor in its usual arc. The neighbor's TV plays some loud soap opera. A pressure cooker whistles downstairs.

Normal sounds. Life sounds.

Outside sounds.

Around noon, I settle near the ceiling. Right beside the crack.

The woman's face is clearer in the midday light. Or maybe I've just spent so long staring at her that I've memorized every line.

"Do you ever wonder what's outside?" I ask.

Silence.

"Stupid question. You're plaster."

More silence.

"I used to think I was stuck here because of the exorcism. The priest. Whatever went wrong that day." I drift closer, until I'm nearly pressed against the ceiling. "But maybe it's simpler than that. Maybe I just... forgot how to leave."

The crack doesn't agree or disagree.

"She hasn't forgotten," I continue. "She leaves every morning. Comes back every night. She's not stuck. Not like me."

But even as I say it, I know it's not entirely true.

Because Priya comes back.

Every single night, no matter how bad the day was, no matter how tired she is—she comes back.

To this flat. To this room. To the crack in the ceiling and the cold corner and the ghost she can't see but talks to anyway.

She's not trapped here.

But maybe she doesn't have anywhere else to go either.

Cut.

Somewhere across the city, in a grey office with bad lighting and a calendar two years out of date, Priya sits at her desk.

The spreadsheet is open. The numbers don't make sense. Her boss sent another email—Subject: Revisions URGENT—and she hasn't opened it yet.

Around her, coworkers type, talk, laugh at something on someone's phone. The world moves. She sits still.

Her eyes drift to the window.

It's small, grimy, half-blocked by another building. But through the gap, she can see a slice of sky. Pale. Hazy with pollution. A crow flies past.

She stares at it the way I stare at the crack.

Like it's the only thing in the room that understands.

Someone calls her name. She doesn't respond right away. Just keeps looking out the window, at the sky, at the city that swallowed her three weeks ago and hasn't spit her back out yet.

"I don't belong here either," she thinks.

Then she blinks, turns back to her computer, and keeps typing.

Cut back.

The flat is quiet when she comes home.

Not empty. Never empty anymore. But quiet.

She locks the door, drops her bag, stands in the middle of the room for a moment like she's trying to remember why she came back.

Then she looks up. At the ceiling. At the crack.

"Still here?" she asks.

I drift down from where I've been all day. Move to my corner. Make the air gently cold—not too much, just enough.

A reply.

She exhales. Something in her shoulders releases.

"Good," she says.

She sits on the mattress, pulls out her phone, scrolls for a second, then puts it facedown.

"I spent all day staring out a window," she says to the crack. To me. To the room. "Thought about your face. This ceiling. This flat."

She lies back, arms spread.

"Isn't that pathetic? I was at work and all I could think about was coming back here."

I hover closer. The rope in my chest pulls, but softly now. Not painful. Just present.

"You know what's funny?" she continues. "I moved to Delhi to start over. New city, new job, new life. All that."

A pause.

"But the only place I don't feel like I'm pretending is here. In this stupid flat. With you."

She turns her head slightly, looking toward my corner.

"Whoever you are."

For a long time, neither of us moves.

Then she closes her eyes.

"Goodnight," she whispers. To the crack. To me.

I make the air warm this time. Just a little.

A different kind of reply.

She smiles without opening her eyes.

"Goodnight to you too."

I don't try to possess another sparrow.

Not the next day. Not the day after.

Because I finally understand.

The world outside is hers. The metro, the office, the streets, the sky.

But this room?

This room is ours.

And some mornings, when she wakes and talks to the ceiling, I think maybe that's enough.

Maybe being stuck isn't about the place.

It's about whether someone stays with you.

And she does.

Every single night.

She stays.

Chapter 5: The First Question

It happens on a Tuesday night, three weeks and four days after she moved in.

Not that I'm counting.

(I'm absolutely counting.)

Priya comes home later than usual. Not office-late. Something else. She's carrying a plastic bag from the chemist downstairs—paracetamol, maybe, or cough syrup. Her eyes are tired in a way that sleep won't fix.

She drops the bag by the door. Doesn't take her shoes off right away. Just stands there for a moment, staring at the room like she's trying to remember why she pays rent for it.

Then she looks up at the ceiling.

"Long day," she tells the crack.

The crack, as always, says nothing.

She walks to the kitchen corner, fills a glass of water, drinks half. Sets it down. Stares at it.

I drift closer. Not too close—I've learned her boundaries by now. But close enough that the air around her cools slightly.

She notices. Pulls her dupatta tighter around her shoulders.

"You're here," she says. Not a question. A statement.

I make the cold a little gentler. Confirmation.

She nods, like we're having a normal conversation. Like this is reasonable.

Maybe it is now.

She walks to the balcony door—not outside, just to the small space where the door frame is, where there's a sliver of Delhi night air seeping through the gap. There's a pot there. Old terracotta, chipped on one side. Inside it, a fake plant. Plastic leaves covered in a month's worth of dust.

It came with the flat. No one ever bothered to throw it out.

Priya leans against the doorframe, glass of water in hand, and stares at the fake plant like it's personally offended her.

"This thing is so depressing," she mutters.

I hover near the ceiling, watching.

She sets the glass down on the floor. Crouches next to the pot. Touches one of the leaves. It's stiff, faded green, coated in grime.

"Who buys a fake plant and then doesn't even dust it?" she asks no one.

Me, technically. Or the tenant before me. Or the landlord. Hard to say.

She sits fully now, cross-legged on the floor next to the pot, like she's given up on doing anything productive tonight.

For a while, she just sits there. Silent. The city hums outside—horns, voices, a dog barking somewhere. Inside, just her breathing and the faint creak of the ceiling fan.

Then, quietly, almost like she's talking to herself:

"Were you here before me?"

The question hangs in the air.

Not to the crack this time. Not to the room in general.

To me.

I freeze.

She doesn't look at my corner. Doesn't look up. Just keeps staring at the fake plant, fingers tracing the rim of the pot.

"I know you're here," she continues, softer now. "I've known for a while. I just didn't... I don't know. Didn't want to make it weird."

She laughs—a small, tired sound.

"Weirder."

I don't move. Don't know how to.

She's asking me something. Directly. Deliberately.

An answer is expected.

"Were you here before me?" she repeats. "Before Aditya? Before Mrs. Sharma? Before... everyone?"

Yes.

The answer is yes.

But how do I say it?

I can't speak. Can't write. The knock system she suggested in the rules—I've never tried it. Never needed to.

But now—

Now she's waiting.

I drift lower. Closer to the plant. The fake leaves are brittle, cheap. Easy to move.

I focus. Push. Not hard. Just... enough.

One leaf shifts.

A tiny scrape against the inside of the pot.

Priya goes still.

Her eyes lock onto the plant.

I do it again. The same leaf. A slow, deliberate nudge.

Her hand, still resting on the pot's rim, tightens.

"Okay," she whispers.

She doesn't scream. Doesn't run. Doesn't even pull her hand back.

Just stares at the leaf, breathing carefully, like she's afraid if she moves too fast, I'll stop.

"Okay," she says again, steadier this time.

Then, after a long pause:

"Thought so."

She doesn't ask anything else right away.

Just sits there, staring at the plant. At the leaf I moved. At the proof she's been living with a ghost.

After a minute, she picks up the glass of water, takes a sip, and sets it back down.

"Right," she says, mostly to herself. "So that's... real."

I stay near the plant. Don't move anything else. Don't want to overwhelm her.

She rubs her face with both hands. Exhales.

"Okay. Okay." She's talking herself through it. "You're here. You've been here. You moved the leaf. That's... fine. That's fine."

It's not fine. I can hear it in her voice—she's trying to convince herself it's fine.

But she doesn't leave.

That's the part that matters.

She shifts, leaning her back against the wall next to the balcony door, knees pulled up to her chest.

"How long?" she asks quietly.

The question is smaller this time. Heavier.

How long have I been here?

Twenty-seven years. Three months. Fourteen days.

But I don't know how to answer that. Can't move twenty-seven leaves. Can't write numbers in dust.

So I don't answer.

The leaf stays still.

She notices. Watches. Waits.

When I don't respond, she nods slowly.

"Okay," she says. "You don't have to tell me. Or you can't. I don't know how this works."

She pulls her knees tighter.

"I don't know how any of this works."

The room is quiet again. But it's a different kind of quiet now. Not empty. Not lonely.

Shared.

She looks at the plant again. At the leaf.

"Can you do that again?" she asks. "Move the leaf?"

I hesitate.

Then I push. Gently. The leaf shifts.

She watches it move. Her face is unreadable—not scared, not calm. Something in between.

"Okay," she says for the fourth or fifth time.

Then she stands. Picks up the glass. Walks to the mattress. Sits down.

Pulls out her phone. Stares at it for a second. Puts it facedown.

Looks up at the ceiling.

"I'm not going to freak out," she tells the crack. Tells me. "I'm too tired to freak out."

She lies down. Stares at the ceiling.

"Were you here before me," she repeats, quieter now. "Yeah. I knew that."

A pause.

"I felt it. The first night. The cold. The books falling. All of it."

She turns on her side, facing my corner.

"I just didn't want to be alone."

Her voice cracks slightly on the last word.

I drift closer. Make the air warmer this time. Not cold. Warm.

She notices. Closes her eyes.

"Thanks," she whispers.

Then, after a long silence:

"Goodnight."

To me. Not the crack.

Me.

I stay in my corner all night, and for the first time in twenty-seven years, I feel like I've been seen.

Not as a ghost.

As someone who answered.

She doesn't mention the plant the next morning.

Wakes at 6:15, same as always. Stretches. Looks at the ceiling. Says, "Morning," to the crack like nothing's changed.

But something has.

I can feel it in the way she moves. Slower. More aware. Like she's listening to the room now, not just living in it.

She brushes her teeth. Boils water for chai. Gets dressed.

Normal routine. Normal sounds.

Except—

Before she leaves, she pauses by the balcony door. Looks at the fake plant.

Doesn't say anything. Just looks.

Then she glances toward my corner. Not quite at me—she still can't see me—but close.

"Have a good day," she says.

Not to the crack. To me.

Then she's gone.

The door clicks shut. Lock turns. Footsteps fade down the stairs.

I drift to the plant and stare at the leaf I moved last night.

It sits there, dusty and plastic and utterly ordinary.

But it's not ordinary anymore.

It's a word now.

Yes.

She comes home at 7:15 PM carrying takeout and a small bag from a bookshop.

I wasn't expecting the bag.

She sets everything down, kicks off her shoes, and immediately walks to the plant.

Crouches next to it. Studies it like it might have moved on its own.

It hasn't. I've left it alone all day.

"Still here?" she asks the room.

I make the air cool near her shoulder. A gentle pulse.

She shivers. Smiles slightly.

"Okay. Good."

She stands, pulls out the takeout—biryani, smells like—and sits on the mattress. But she doesn't eat right away.

Instead, she reaches for the bookshop bag. Pulls out a small notebook. Plain black cover. Spiral-bound.

Opens it to the first page.

Writes something.

Then she tears the page out, stands, and walks to the desk. Tapes it to the wall next to the list of rules.

I drift closer to read it.

QUESTIONS FOR THE GHOST

Underneath, in smaller letters:

One leaf = yes. Two leaves = no. Nothing = I don't know / can't answer.

She steps back, looks at it, then looks toward my corner.

"Is that okay?" she asks.

I move to the plant. Push one leaf.

Yes.

She exhales. Sits back down on the mattress.

"Okay. Good. We have a system now."

She finally opens the biryani. Takes a bite. Chews slowly, thinking.

Then she asks:

"Did you die here?"

The question lands heavy.

I hover near the plant. The leaf is right there. One push. One answer.

But I don't move.

She waits. Watches the plant. When nothing happens, she nods.

"Okay. You don't want to answer that. That's... fair."

She takes another bite.

"Or you can't," she adds quietly. "I don't know which. But it's okay."

She eats in silence for a while. Then:

"Can you leave? Like, the flat? Can you go outside?"

I think about the sparrows. The ceiling fan. The electrocution. The crow.

I think about the rope in my chest that pulls tighter the farther I go.

I move two leaves.

No.

She sets her fork down. Looks at the plant for a long time.

"You're stuck here," she says softly.

I don't answer. Don't need to. She already knows.

"For how long?"

I still don't know how to answer that. Can't move twenty-seven leaves. Can't write in dust.

The plant stays still.

She watches it. Waiting. When nothing happens, she nods again.

"Okay. Long time, then."

She picks up her fork. Finishes the biryani. Doesn't ask anything else.

But before she goes to bed, she walks to the plant, crouches next to it, and gently wipes one of the leaves with her dupatta.

The dust comes off. The plastic underneath is a brighter green than I remembered.

"There," she says. "Now you're slightly less depressing."

She stands. Looks toward my corner.

"Goodnight."

One word. But it sounds different now.

Like she's talking to a person.

I make the air warm around her. A reply.

She smiles.

Then she lies down and closes her eyes.

Over the next few days, the questions come slowly. Carefully.

She doesn't ask every night. Sometimes she just comes home, eats, talks to the crack about her day, and goes to sleep.

But when she does ask, I answer.

"Are you angry?"

Two leaves. No.

"Are you lonely?"

One leaf. Yes.

She's quiet for a long time after that one.

"Were there others? Before me?"

One leaf. Yes.

"Did they leave because of you?"

One leaf. Yes.

"Do you want me to leave?"

Two leaves. Hard. Fast. No.

She stares at the plant. Then nods.

"Okay," she says. "I won't."

One night, she comes home with a new pot.

Small. Terracotta, like the old one, but not chipped. And inside it—a real plant. Small, green, alive.

She sets it next to the fake one on the floor by the balcony door.

"Thought you could use an upgrade," she says. "But I'm keeping the fake one too. For... communication purposes."

She waters the real plant. Then sits next to both of them.

"Can you move the real one?" she asks.

I try. Push at the leaves. They're softer, heavier, damp from watering. Harder to move.

But I manage. One leaf shifts. Barely.

She grins.

"Okay. So you're not that powerful."

If I had a body, I'd laugh.

Instead, I move the fake plant's leaf. Hard. Deliberate.

She laughs. Actually laughs.

"Point taken."

She leans back against the wall, looking at both plants. At the list of questions on the wall. At the corner where I stay.

"This is so weird," she says.

Then, softer:

"But I don't hate it."

That night, before she sleeps, she asks one more question.

Quieter than the others. Almost like she's afraid of the answer.

"Do you remember your name?"

I hover near the plant.

I do remember.

But I haven't heard it in twenty-seven years. Haven't thought of myself as a name in longer than that.

I've been "the ghost" for so long, I don't know if the name still fits.

The plant stays still.

She waits. Then nods.

"Okay. That's okay."

She lies down. Pulls the blanket up.

"You don't need a name," she says to the ceiling. To me. "I'll just keep calling you 'you.'"

A pause.

"Is that okay?"

I move one leaf.

Yes.

She smiles into the dark.

"Goodnight, you."

I make the air gentle. Warm.

Goodnight, Priya.

She can't hear me.

But maybe, one day, she will.

The question-and-answer becomes a routine.

Not every night. Some nights she's too tired, or comes home too late, or just wants to lie on the mattress and stare at the ceiling in silence. I don't push. Neither does she.

But when she does ask, I answer.

The system works. One leaf for yes. Two for no. Silence when I can't—or won't—say.

She's smart about it. Doesn't ask things that need long explanations. Keeps it simple. Binary. Yes or no. Can you? Did you? Are you?

We build a vocabulary out of plastic and patience.

Two weeks after the first question, she comes home with her hair wet.

Not from a shower. From rain.

Delhi doesn't rain often this time of year, but when it does, it's sudden and mean. She's drenched—kurta sticking to her shoulders, dupatta heavy and dripping, backpack soaked through.

She drops everything by the door and just stands there, shivering slightly.

"Forgot my umbrella," she mutters. "Obviously."

I make the air warmer near her. As much as I can.

She notices. Exhales.

"Thanks."

She changes into dry clothes—an old t-shirt, loose pants—and wrings out her dupatta over the sink. Then she makes chai. Not the usual quick version. The slow kind. Boiling the tea leaves twice. Adding extra ginger.

The flat smells like warmth and spice.

She brings the chai to the mattress, sits cross-legged, wraps her hands around the cup.

Stares at the fake plant by the balcony.

For a long time, she doesn't say anything.

Then:

"Can I ask you something harder tonight?"

I drift closer to the plant. One leaf shifts slightly.

Yes.

She takes a sip of chai. Sets the cup down.

"Are you... sad?"

The question sits between us.

I don't move right away.

Sad.

Am I sad?

I've been alone for twenty-seven years. Watching people come and go. Watching the city change outside the window. Watching my own existence shrink down to cold spots and flickering lights and a crack in the ceiling that never talks back.

Am I sad?

I move one leaf.

Yes.

She nods slowly. Like she expected that.

"Yeah," she says quietly. "Me too."

She drinks more chai. Doesn't look at me. Just stares into the cup.

"I thought moving here would fix it," she says. "New city, new job. Fresh start. Everyone kept saying that. Fresh start."

Her voice is flat. Tired.

"But it's the same. Just louder."

I stay near the plant. Listening.

"I left Bangalore because I couldn't breathe there anymore," she continues. "Everyone wanted something from me. My parents wanted me to get married. My boss wanted me to work harder. My friends wanted me to be fun, to go out, to stop being so..."

She trails off. Searches for the word.

"Tired."

She sets the chai down.

"But I was tired. I am tired. And no one got that. So I left."

A pause.

"And now I'm here. And I'm still tired. And no one gets it here either."

She looks toward my corner. Not quite at me, but close.

"Except maybe you."

I make the air around her a little warmer.

She smiles. Faint, but real.

"You don't expect anything from me," she says. "You just... exist. And let me exist."

She picks up the chai again. Takes another sip.

"Is that why you're still here?" she asks the plant. "Because you don't know how to leave? Or because you don't want to?"

I don't know how to answer that.

Both, maybe. Or neither.

The plant stays still.

She waits. When nothing happens, she nods.

"Yeah. That's a hard one."

She finishes the chai. Sets the cup aside.

Then she lies down on the mattress, facing the ceiling.

"I think I'm staying," she says. "In Delhi. In this flat. For a while, at least."

A pause.

"Is that okay with you?"

I move one leaf. Fast. Clear.

Yes.

She smiles at the ceiling.

"Good."

The next night, she doesn't ask a question.

Instead, she comes home with a small cloth bag.

Inside: incense sticks. Sandalwood.

She lights one near the balcony, lets the smoke curl upward.

"I don't know if you like this," she says. "Or if you can even smell it. But my grandmother used to say incense is for the dead. So..."

She trails off. Shrugs.

"Thought I'd try."

I can smell it. Faintly. The smoke moves through me in a way air doesn't—thicker, slower, carrying memory.

I make the air around the incense flicker slightly. The smoke shifts.

She watches. Smiles.

"You can smell it."

One leaf moves.

Yes.

"Good," she says. "Then I'll do this sometimes. If you want."

One leaf.

Yes.

She sits on the floor near the incense, watching the smoke.

"My grandmother died when I was twelve," she says quietly. "I used to think she was still around. In the house. Watching."

A pause.

"Everyone said I was being childish. That ghosts aren't real."

She glances at the plant. At me.

"But they are, aren't they?"

One leaf.

Yes.

She nods.

"I knew it."

She stays there until the incense burns out. Then she stands, brushes off her knees, and looks toward my corner.

"Goodnight," she says.

I make the air warm.

She goes to bed.

And I stay by the balcony, where the smell of sandalwood still lingers, and think about the word she used.

Sad.

Yes. I'm sad.

But I'm less sad than I was a month ago.

A week later, she comes home angry.

I can tell before she even opens the door. Her footsteps are heavier on the stairs. The key scrapes in the lock. The door slams.

She throws her bag on the floor.

"Horrible day," she says to no one. To me. To the room.

She paces. Back and forth. Runs her hands through her hair.

"My boss is an idiot. My coworker is an idiot. Everyone in that office is an idiot."

She stops in the middle of the room. Breathes hard.

"And I'm an idiot for staying."

I drift closer. Don't know what to do.

She looks at the plant.

"Can you..." She stops. Shakes her head. "Never mind. You can't fix this."

I move one leaf anyway.

She stares at it. Then laughs—sharp, bitter.

"What are you saying yes to? You don't even know what I was going to ask."

I move two leaves.

No. I don't know.

She stops laughing. Looks at the plant more carefully.

"You just... wanted to answer?"

One leaf.

Yes.

She exhales. Sits down on the floor, right there in the middle of the room.

"You're weird," she says.

Two leaves.

No.

She laughs again. Softer this time.

"Okay. Maybe I'm weird."

One leaf.

Yes.

She grins despite herself.

"Rude."

She sits there for a while, knees pulled to her chest, staring at nothing.

Then, quieter:

"Do you ever wish you could just... leave? Start over somewhere else?"

I think about the sparrows. The failed flights. The rope in my chest.

Two leaves.

No.

She looks surprised.

"Really?"

I hesitate. Then move one leaf.

Yes. Really.

She tilts her head, thinking.

"You don't want to leave."

One leaf.

Yes.

"Even though you're stuck."

One leaf.

Yes.

She's quiet for a long time.

Then she says, so softly I almost don't hear:

"Me neither."

We stay like that. Her on the floor. Me by the plant. The city
humming outside.

Eventually, she gets up. Makes food. Eats in silence. Goes to bed.

But before she sleeps, she says:

"Thanks. For answering."

I make the air warm.

She closes her eyes.

And I stay in my corner, thinking about the questions she didn't ask
tonight.

The ones I'm not sure I could answer even if she did.

Why are you still here?

What are you waiting for?

Do you want to be free?

I don't know.

But I know one thing.

I don't want her to leave.

And maybe that's answer enough.

Priya doesn't ask anything that night.

No "Are you sad?" No "Can you smell this?" No "Do you want me to leave?" The notebook page taped to the wall—QUESTIONS FOR THE GHOST—stares down at us, but she doesn't look at it once.

She comes home on time for once. No rain. No storm. No emergency. Just the regular kind of exhaustion that fits into a tiffin box and takes the metro home with you.

"Hi," she tells the crack, dropping her bag by the door. "Survived another one."

She doesn't sound triumphant. Just factual.

I hover near the balcony, watching.

She makes chai. The simple version—one boil, no ginger, no cardamom. Doesn't even wait for it to cool. Just drinks it standing at the sink, staring at the wall like it holds answers.

Eats leftover rice straight from the steel dabba. Cold. No reheating. Fork scraping against metal.

Doesn't light a diya. Doesn't light incense. Doesn't sit by the plants.

Just moves through the room like she's checking boxes on a list. Eat. Drink. Exist. Repeat.

I drift closer to the fake plant, waiting.

She walks right past it without a glance.

The leaves stay still. The real plant beside it looks greener than it did yesterday—she watered it this morning before work—but she doesn't acknowledge that either.

I shouldn't mind. This is what I wanted once—tenants who ignore me, nights that pass without questions, without expectations. Just me and the crack and the rope in my chest and the same four walls.

But now the silence feels wrong.

Lopsided.

Like a conversation cut off mid-sentence.

She pulls the thin blanket over herself, lies down on the mattress, and faces the wall. Not the ceiling. Not my corner. Just the blank, chipped paint.

"Goodnight," she says.

Not to the crack this time. Not to me.

Just... out. Into the air. A formality.

I make the air warm anyway. Gently. Around her shoulders, where the blanket doesn't quite cover.

She doesn't react. Doesn't shiver, doesn't adjust, doesn't say thank you.

Already halfway into sleep, or pretending to be.

I stay near the ceiling, watching her breathe.

In. Out. Slow and steady.

Normal.

But something about it feels off.

I've learned Priya's rhythms over the past month.

The way she talks faster when she's nervous. The way she hums under her breath when she's cooking. The way she touches the edge of the desk when she walks past it, like checking that the room is still solid.

Tonight, none of that.

Tonight, she's going through motions.

And I don't know why.

I drift from the balcony to the ceiling, then to my corner, then back again. Restless. Useless.

She shifts in her sleep. Pulls the blanket tighter. Mutters something I can't make out.

For the first time since she moved in, it isn't her question that keeps me awake.

It's mine.

Do you regret coming here?

Did running away help?

Are you afraid you'll never leave?

I can move books and leaves and cold spots and warmth. I can answer yes or no with plastic foliage and patience.

But I can't move a single word into the air where she could hear it.

I can't ask.

Around 2 AM, she wakes.

Not fully. Just a jolt—her body flinching like she's falling. Her hand shoots out, grabs the edge of the mattress, holds on.

Her breathing quickens.

A dream. Bad one, probably.

I move closer. Make the air warmer. Steady.

She blinks into the dark, disoriented. Looks around the room like she's trying to remember where she is.

Then she sees the crack in the ceiling. The faint glow from the streetlight outside catching the edge of the plaster woman's face.

She exhales. Lets go of the mattress.

"Still here," she whispers.

To herself. To the crack. To the room.

She lies back down. Pulls the blanket up to her chin.

Stares at the ceiling for a long time, eyes open, unblinking.

I stay close. Don't move anything. Don't make noise. Just... exist nearby.

Eventually, her eyes close again.

But I don't think she sleeps.

By morning, she's back to routine.

Wakes at 6:15. Talks to the crack. Splashes water on her face. Ties her hair with a pen.

But something's still missing.

She doesn't say goodbye before she leaves.

Just locks the door and goes.

The flat feels emptier than it should.

I drift to the window and watch her walk down the street. Blue kurta today. Same backpack. Same tired shoulders.

She turns the corner. Disappears.

And I'm alone.

I've been alone for twenty-seven years. I should be used to it.

But this feels different.

This feels like she took something with her when she left.

Not on purpose. Just... forgot to leave it behind.

I return to the ceiling, press myself against the plaster beside the crack.

"Do you think she's okay?" I ask the woman's face.

Silence.

Of course.

"She didn't ask anything last night," I continue. "Didn't even look at the plant. That's not like her."

The crack says nothing.

"I wanted to ask her something," I admit. "But I couldn't. I don't know how."

Still nothing.

"There's this thing she's never asked me," I say quietly. "Are you afraid?" And I don't know if she hasn't thought of it, or if she already knows the answer."

The plaster stares.

"I am," I say. "Afraid. Not of being stuck. I've been stuck for twenty-seven years. I'm used to that."

I pause.

"I'm afraid she'll leave. Not move out. Just... stop coming back. Stop asking questions. Stop lighting incense and watering plants and talking to you like you're a person."

The crack offers no comfort.

"And I can't ask her not to," I continue. "Because what right do I have? I'm dead. I'm stuck. I can move a plastic leaf. That's all I am."

The room is silent except for the distant sound of traffic below.

"She's afraid too," I say after a while. "I can feel it. She doesn't say it, but it's there. In the way she holds her phone. In the way she faces

the wall when she sleeps. In the way she came home last night and didn't ask me anything."

I drift lower, closer to the mattress where she slept.

"There's a question she won't ask," I whisper. "And a question I can't."

The flat hums with emptiness.

Outside, Delhi wakes up. Horns. Voices. Pressure cookers. Dogs barking. Life continuing.

Inside, just me.

And all the words I can't say.

She comes home late that night.

Later than usual. Past 8 PM. The sky outside is fully dark now, no orange-grey transition.

She's carrying something. A plastic bag. Pharmacy, maybe, or the small grocery shop two streets over.

She sets it down, kicks off her shoes, and stands in the middle of the room for a moment.

Just stands.

Then she looks at my corner.

Not the crack. Not the plant.

My corner.

"You're here, right?" she asks.

It's not her usual greeting. There's something tentative in it. Almost nervous.

I move to the plant immediately. Push one leaf.

Yes.

She exhales.

"Good."

She walks to the mattress. Sits. Pulls out her phone, looks at it, puts it facedown.

Stares at the plant.

"I almost asked you something last night," she says. "But I didn't."

I don't move. Just listen.

"I wanted to ask if you ever get tired," she continues. "Not like... sleepy. Just tired. Of being here. Of waiting. Of existing in one room for—I don't even know how long."

The plant stays still.

She looks at it. Waits.

When nothing moves, she nods slowly.

"Yeah. Hard question."

She picks at a thread on the blanket.

"I'm tired," she says quietly. "Not of being here. Just... of everything else. Work. Calls from home. Pretending I'm fine."

A pause.

"But when I come back here," she says, looking up at the ceiling, at the crack, at my corner, "I don't have to pretend."

She looks at the plant again.

"Is that weird?"

I move one leaf.

Yes.

She laughs. Small, but real.

"Yeah. It is."

Then she reaches for the plastic bag she brought home. Pulls out a small candle. White. Unscented.

"I thought maybe we could try something," she says. "Instead of questions."

She lights the candle. Sets it on the floor between the two plants.

Then she sits cross-legged in front of it.

"You don't have to answer anything tonight," she says. "And I won't ask."

She watches the flame.

"Let's just... be here. Together. Quiet."

I drift closer. Sit—if you can call it that—beside her.

The candle flickers. Not from me. Just from air moving through the room.

We stay like that.

Her. Me. The flame. The crack. The plants.

No questions. No answers.

Just presence.

And for the first time in a long time, the silence doesn't feel wrong.

It feels full.

Two nights later, she brings Bangalore into the room.

Not on purpose. It slips out between spoonfuls of curd rice and sips of over-sweet chai, like something she's been holding in her mouth for weeks and finally gets tired of tasting alone.

She sits by the balcony, back against the wall, knees pulled up. The fake plant on her left, the real one on her right. Incense burning between them, smoke making thin grey rivers in the air.

"I wasn't going to tell you this," she says.

No preamble. No "are you here?" No test leaf.

Just that.

I move closer, keeping the air steady. Not warm, not cold. Just present.

She watches the smoke curl and disappear.

"When I told everyone I was moving to Delhi," she says slowly, "they all asked the same thing. 'Job, right?' 'Better pay?' 'Bigger city?'"

She snorts softly.

"No one asked if I was okay."

She picks at a chip in the terracotta pot, flaking off a piece of dried clay.

"My parents thought I was being dramatic. 'You're twenty-six, everyone's tired at twenty-six,' my mother said. 'You have a job, you have a roof, what's the problem?'"

She mimics the voice without malice. Just accuracy.

"I tried to explain. That I felt like I was walking underwater. That everything hurt in this... slow way. Not sharp enough to point at. Just—" She waves her hand vaguely. "Heavy."

The incense stick burns lower. Ash leans, falls.

"I stopped going out. Stopped answering calls. My friends thought I was mad at them. My parents thought I was ungrateful. My boss thought I was lazy."

She exhales.

"Maybe they were all right. I don't know."

She looks toward my corner then. Not at the ceiling. Not at the crack.

At the space where I am.

"At some point, 'change of scene' started sounding easier than 'no one understands me,'" she says. "So I took the transfer. Packed one bag. Booked a ticket."

She laughs once, quietly.

"They all hugged me at the station and said, 'You'll be fine.' Like that was something I'd already decided."

She falls silent.

The room waits.

I don't move a leaf. Don't flicker a light. Don't shift the temperature.

For once, it feels like anything I did would be interrupting.

She leans her head back against the wall, eyes half-closed.

"I didn't come here to start over," she says finally. "I came here so if I fell apart, it wouldn't make work for people who already thought I was broken."

The word sits heavy in the air.

Broken.

She looks at the fake plant.

"You don't think that, right?" she asks. Almost joking, but not quite.

I should move a leaf. I know the system. One for no, two for yes—wait, or was it the other way? Doesn't matter.

Instead, I move the air.

Soft, careful warmth around her shoulders. Not cold. Not spectral. Just... there.

She feels it. Smiles without looking up.

"Yeah," she says quietly. "I didn't think so."

She reaches out and, very gently, adjusts one of the fake leaves. Not asking a question. Not waiting for an answer.

Just touching it. Like it's real.

"Your turn someday," she tells the room. "If you want."

She stands, brushes dust off her hands, and walks to the light switch.

Pauses.

"Thank you," she says. "For listening."

The light clicks off.

"Goodnight," she says.

To the crack.

To the corner.

To me.

In the dark, with only the city's dull orange glow leaking through the window, I stay by the balcony where the incense burned out.

The rope in my chest feels different tonight.

Not looser, exactly.

But quieter.

Not because I can leave.

Because, for the first time in twenty-seven years, someone brought their whole self in.

All the broken pieces.

All the tired parts.

All the things she couldn't say to anyone else.

And left them here.

With me.

In this room that we both can't leave.

And maybe that's not such a lonely thing anymore.

Chapter 6: If She Goes

The Wedding Card

The wedding card arrives on a Tuesday.

Not in the mail—that would require an address her family actually remembers. It comes through WhatsApp, forwarded by her mother at 11:43 AM, while Priya is presumably at work and I'm doing what I always do: hovering near the ceiling, staring at the crack, waiting for 7 PM when the door will open and she'll walk back in.

I don't see the message, obviously. Can't check phones. Can't read texts through walls.

But I feel it the moment she does.

The air in the flat shifts. Not temperature—something else. Like the way the sky feels before a storm, when the pressure drops and birds go quiet.

Something's coming.

She gets home at 7:15.

Later than usual, but not late enough to worry about. I hear her footsteps on the stairs—slow today, heavier. She stops once on the second-floor landing. I hear her sigh through the walls.

Then she climbs the rest of the way.

The key scrapes in the lock. The door opens.

She steps inside and doesn't say anything.

Not "Hi."

Not "I'm home."

Not even a greeting to the crack.

Just silence.

She drops her bag by the door, kicks off her shoes without looking, and walks straight to the balcony. Stands there with her forehead pressed against the glass, phone clutched in one hand.

I drift closer. Not too close—I've learned her boundaries—but close enough to feel the tension radiating off her like heat.

Outside, Delhi is its usual self. Traffic. Horns. Someone shouting about vegetables. A scooter backfiring. The city doesn't care that something's wrong.

But I do.

I move to the plant. The fake one. Hover near the leaves, waiting.

She stays at the balcony for a long time. Staring out. Phone tapping against her thigh—tap, tap, tap—like she's counting something.

Finally, she turns.

Walks to the mattress. Sits down heavily, like her bones are tired of holding her up.

Sets the phone on the floor beside her. Faceup this time. The screen glows.

I can't read it from here, but I see colors. Red. Gold. Text. A photo of something ornate.

She stares at it.

Then she looks up. At the ceiling. At the crack.

"There's a wedding," she says.

Her voice is flat. No emotion. Just fact.

I don't move anything yet. Just listen.

"My cousin," she adds. "Bangalore. Big thing. Three days of ceremonies. Sangeet, mehendi, the whole production."

She picks up the phone. Scrolls. Sets it back down.

"My mother sent me the card. 'Everyone will be there,' she says. 'Book your tickets.'"

She laughs—short, bitter.

"Not 'Do you want to come?' or 'Would you like to visit?' Just 'Book your tickets.' Like it's already decided."

She pulls her knees up to her chest. Wraps her arms around them.

"They want me there for a week," she says quietly. "Maybe more. 'Stay longer,' my mother said. 'You never visit. People are asking about you.'"

A pause.

"People. Like I'm some kind of gossip topic. 'What's she doing in Delhi?' 'Is she married yet?' 'Why did she leave?'"

She rests her chin on her knees.

"I don't want to go," she says. Then, softer: "I also don't know if I can say no."

I drift to the plant. Make the air around it stir. One leaf trembles.

She notices. Looks at it.

"You think I should go?" she asks. Half-smiling. "Of course you do. You probably think I'm being dramatic."

I don't answer. Not yes. Not no.

Because something cold has settled in my chest—colder than anything I've ever made.

A week.

She's talking about leaving for a week.

People have left before. Trips, emergencies, work travel. They always came back. Usually.

But something about the way she said it—I don't know if I can say no—makes it sound less like a visit and more like a test.

Like she's not sure which side she'll land on when it's over.

She doesn't say, "I'll be back."

She says, "I don't know."

She doesn't eat much that night.

Orders dosa from the place down the street—her favorite, usually—but only picks at it. Tears off small pieces. Chews slowly. Stares at nothing.

Leaves half of it wrapped in foil on the desk.

Makes chai. Lets it get cold.

Sits on the mattress with her phone in her lap, scrolling, not reading.

I hover near the ceiling, watching.

She looks small tonight. Smaller than usual.

Like the city outside is pressing in on her from all sides and she's trying to make herself fit into the only space she has left.

Around 9 PM, she sets the phone down and looks at the plant.

"If I go," she says slowly, "they're going to want me to stay."

She's not asking me. Just thinking out loud. But I listen anyway.

"They'll say, 'See? You're smiling again. You're laughing. Family is good for you. Why did you ever leave?'"

She pulls the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

"And maybe they'll be right. Maybe I will feel better there. Maybe Delhi was a mistake."

The word mistake lands heavy.

I move closer to the plant. Make one leaf shift. Just a little.

She sees it.

"You don't think it was a mistake," she says. Not a question. A statement.

I move the leaf again. Deliberately.

No.

She stares at the plant for a long time.

Then she nods slowly.

"Yeah. Me neither."

But there's doubt in her voice.

She doesn't ask any questions that night.

Doesn't pull out the notebook. Doesn't light incense. Doesn't sit by the plants like she usually does.

Just lies down on the mattress, facing the wall, and pulls the blanket over her head.

"Goodnight," she says. Muffled. Distant.

Not to me.

Not to the crack.

Just into the dark.

I make the air warm around her anyway. Gently. Carefully.

She doesn't react.

I stay near the ceiling all night, watching the slow rise and fall of the blanket.

She doesn't sleep well.

I can tell by the way she shifts. Turns. Pulls the blanket tighter, then kicks it off. Mutters something I can't hear.

Around 3 AM, she sits up. Stares at the ceiling.

At the crack.

At me.

"If I go," she whispers, "will you still be here when I come back?"

My entire existence freezes.

She's asking me something I can't answer.

Not because I don't want to.

Because I don't know.

I've been here for twenty-seven years. I've never left. Never could.

But if she goes—if she leaves for a week, or two, or longer—will I still be me when she comes back?

Or will I fade back into what I was before she arrived?

A cold spot. A draft. A thing that moves books and scares tenants.

Not a person.

Not someone with a corner and a plant and a name she never uses but knows is there.

She waits.

The plant stays still.

After a long moment, she lies back down.

"Yeah," she says quietly. "I don't know either."

She closes her eyes.

And I stay in my corner, staring at the crack, feeling the rope in my chest pull tighter than it has in weeks.

Because for the first time since she moved in, I'm afraid.

Not of being alone.

I've been alone for twenty-seven years.

I'm afraid she won't come back.

And I won't know how to be a ghost anymore if she doesn't.

Priya spends the next two days pretending she hasn't already made the decision.

To anyone else, it would look like indecision. To the room, it smells like delay.

She wakes, works, comes home, moves through the flat like normal. Brushes her teeth. Makes chai. Talks to the crack about office nonsense. But the wedding sits under everything—like dust in the corners, like the stain on the ceiling you can't unsee once you've noticed it.

She doesn't bring it up again.

Not to the crack. Not to the plant. Not to me.

But her phone does. Every few hours.

The first follow-up comes the next morning.

She's halfway through getting ready for work—hair wet, towel over one shoulder—when her phone buzzes on the mattress. She glances at it, sees the name, and freezes.

“Amma.”

The word is more exhale than sound.

She wipes her hand quickly on the towel, picks up the phone, presses it to her ear.

“Haan, Ma.”

Her voice goes flatter, more careful. The version of her she wears for family.

I hover near the ceiling, watching her pace between the bathroom and the mattress.

“No, I saw the card... yes, it’s nice... very red... yeah, I’ll call Chinnu and congratulate her.”

She pulls the towel tighter around herself like armor.

“No, I didn’t book yet... work, Ma... I have to check... I can’t just disappear for ten days...”

She rolls her eyes at the ceiling, but her voice stays calm, polite.

“I’ll see, okay? I’ll see... yes... yes, I know everyone will be there... Ma, I have to go, I’m getting late... yes... okay... bye.”

She hangs up and tosses the phone onto the mattress like it burned her hand.

Stands there a moment, breathing.

Then she looks at the crack.

“She says ten days now,” she tells it. “Not one week. Ten days.”

She laughs once, humorless.

“Soon it’ll be, ‘Why don’t you just move back? What’s in Delhi anyway?’”

She doesn’t look at the plant.

But she glances at my corner.

And that’s answer enough.

That night, she tries to talk herself out of the worry.

She sits by the balcony, knees pulled up, real plant on one side, fake on the other. No incense tonight. Just the city’s smell leaking through the door—dust, frying oil, something burning two buildings away.

“I’m overthinking this,” she tells the plant. “It’s just a wedding. People go, they come back, life continues. You know?”

I move one leaf.

Yes.

She nods, grateful for the illusion of agreement.

“Exactly. I’m not special. People travel all the time.”

She chews her lower lip.

“Flights are expensive, though,” she adds. “And crowded. And Bangalore will be... Bangalore.”

Her face tightens on the last word.

She stares at the floor.

“Do you think,” she asks suddenly, “that if I go, they’ll let me come back as I am?”

She doesn’t specify who “they” is. Family. City. Life. All of the above.

I hover above the plant. This one isn’t yes/no. Not really.

I move no leaf at all.

She notices. Waits. When nothing happens, she exhales.

“Yeah,” she says quietly. “Me neither.”

On the second day, the landlord shows up.

It’s early evening. The light has just started turning that dusty orange. Priya’s not home yet. It’s just me and the crack and the plants and the usual sounds of the building—TVs, pressure cookers, taps.

Then heavy footsteps on the stairs. A familiar key tried in the outer lock without the fumbling hesitation of a tenant.

The door opens.

The landlord steps in. Kurta, keys in hand, phone pressed between his shoulder and ear.

“Yes, yes, I told you that flat is taken,” he’s saying. “New girl from Bangalore. Working in some company. No, no, she’s not complaining. This one’s quiet.”

He glances around the room out of habit. Flicks the light switch on and off, even though the light already works. Checks the window latch. Never quite looks at the crack.

Or at me.

“Fifteen thousand is cheap for this area, bhai,” he continues into the phone. “What to do? That flat has history. People talk.”

He shrugs like he’s talking about plumbing, not a ghost.

I drift closer, anger prickling. History.

He walks toward the balcony, peers out, nods at something only he can see.

“Yes, yes, Malviya Nagar is safe now,” he says. “That old story? Arre, nothing yaar. Just rumors. Previous tenant had... problems. Now it’s fine. Good energy.”

He almost sounds like Mrs. Sharma for a second.

Good energy.

He checks the cheap cupboard next, opening and closing doors that stick a little and always have. He doesn’t touch the desk drawer where Priya keeps her notebook. Doesn’t go near the plants.

“New girl said she might go to Bangalore for wedding,” he adds casually. “But she’ll come back. She signed a year’s agreement. Why are you worrying?”

He laughs at something the other person says.

“Yes, yes, even if she leaves early, I’ll find someone. That flat never stays empty long.”

He pockets his keys, steps back toward the door.

I feel something sink inside me that isn’t physical.

“It never stays empty long,” he repeats, almost to himself now.
“Someone always comes.”

He leaves. The door clicks shut.

The flat feels smaller.

Not because of what he said about the “history.” I know my own history. I was here for it.

It’s the other thing.

“Even if she leaves early, I’ll find someone.”

Just another tenant. Another line on his mental ledger. Replaceable.

He’s right, of course. Someone will always come.

But for the first time in twenty-seven years, the idea doesn’t comfort me.

Because for the first time, I don’t want “someone.”

I want her.

Priya comes home an hour later.

She looks more tired than angry today. That’s worse, somehow.

She drops her bag, notices the slightly ajar cupboard door, and frowns.

“He came in, didn’t he?” she says to the crack. “Didn’t even call.”

She shuts the cupboard harder than necessary.

“I hate when he does that. Just... walks in. Like this is still his.”

She stops. Looks around.

“This is our place,” she corrects softly.

Our.

The word hangs in the air like incense smoke.

She goes to the mattress. Sits. Takes out her phone. Scrolls.

I drift closer to see—the way you stand on tiptoe out of old habit, even when you know you can’t actually read.

She opens the wedding card image again.

Red and gold fill the screen. Names in fancy fonts. Dates. Venue. Blessings.

Her thumb hovers over the call icon next to “Amma.”

Doesn’t press it.

Instead, she locks the phone and sets it aside.

Then she looks at the plant.

“I have to tell them something,” she says. “Yes or no.”

A beat.

“Do you want me to go?”

She asks it like she already knows the answer will be “yes.”

I move closer to the leaf.

I should say yes.

A week with family, with noise, with people who have known her since she was a child. A break from the flat, from the office, from talking to a ghost because no one else listens.

I should say yes.

I don’t move.

The plant stays still.

She waits.

Her face shifts—from expectation, to confusion, to something that looks dangerously close to hope.

“You don’t know?” she asks.

I still don’t move.

Because it’s not that I don’t know.

It’s that I know too many things at once.

That it might be good for her.

That it might hurt her.

That she might come back lighter.

That she might not come back at all.

How do you compress all that into a plastic leaf?

She watches the plant for a long time.

Then she nods, like she's heard the answer anyway.

"Yeah," she says quietly. "Me neither."

She picks up the phone again.

Stares at it.

Puts it down.

"Tomorrow," she tells the crack. Tells me. Tells herself. "I'll decide tomorrow."

She lies down on the mattress, facing the ceiling this time.

"Goodnight," she says.

It's not clear who she's talking to.

I make the air warm.

Sleep doesn't come easy for either of us.

Packing

Tomorrow turns into three more days.

Not because she's avoiding the decision. Because she's already made it and is just waiting for the right moment to admit it out loud.

I can tell by the way she moves through the flat now. Lighter. Quicker. Like someone who's already halfway gone.

On Thursday, she stays up late scrolling through flight prices.

On Friday, she comes home with a new duffel bag from the market. Blue. Cheap canvas. Still smells like the shop.

She sets it by the door without explanation.

Doesn't look at me.

Doesn't look at the plant.

Just leaves it there like a warning.

Saturday morning, she calls her mother.

I can hear it from across the room. Not the words—just the tone. Higher pitched than usual. More animated. The voice she uses when she's pretending everything is fine.

"Yes, Ma... I booked... Tuesday morning flight... I'll be there by afternoon... yes, I know the sangeet is that night... I'll manage..."

She paces while she talks. From the balcony to the mattress and back. Nervous energy.

"No, I'm not bringing anyone... Ma, please... I don't have a 'nice boy' to bring... because I don't, okay?... yes, fine, we'll talk about it when I'm there..."

She closes her eyes briefly. The universal gesture of daughters everywhere trying not to say what they're actually thinking.

"Okay... yes... love you too... bye."

She hangs up.

Stands in the middle of the room.

Looks at the duffel bag by the door.

Then at the ceiling.

"Tuesday," she tells the crack.

Three days.

The words sit in the room like stones.

She walks to the plant. Crouches beside it.

"I'm coming back," she says firmly. "I just need to go for a bit. Okay?"

I don't move.

She waits.

"Please say okay," she whispers.

I push one leaf. Slowly.

Yes. Okay.

But it feels like a lie.

Not because I don't believe she'll try.

Because I'm not sure trying will be enough.

By Sunday evening, the packing begins.

Not serious packing. Just the slow, tentative kind. Opening drawers, taking things out, setting them aside, putting them back.

She pulls out the one good kurta she owns—the maroon one she wore to the office once and never again because someone said it was "too festive."

Holds it up. Frowns. Folds it into the duffel bag.

Then a dupatta. Then leggings. Then the small pouch where she keeps jewelry she never wears but can't throw away.

She works quietly. No music. No phone calls. Just the sound of fabric and zippers and her own breathing.

I hover near the desk, watching.

Every item she puts in the bag feels like a small subtraction.

The flat is still hers. The mattress, the desk, the plants, the crack—all still here.

But she's already dividing herself.

The part that will go.

The part that will stay.

I don't know which part is bigger.

Monday night, she finishes packing.

The duffel bag sits by the door, zipped shut. Not heavy. She's only going for seven days—she kept saying that to herself all evening like a mantra. Seven days. Just seven.

But she packed like she's not sure.

Extra clothes. An extra phone charger. The framed photo she usually keeps facedown in the drawer—she hesitated, then tucked it into the side pocket.

She sits on the mattress now, staring at the bag.

"This is stupid," she says to no one. "It's just a wedding. I've done this before."

She hasn't, though. Not since moving to Delhi.

Not since me.

She gets up. Walks to the balcony. Looks at both plants.

The real one has grown a little. Two new leaves since she brought it home. She waters it carefully, even though she watered it this morning.

Then she turns to the fake one.

Crouches beside it.

"I need you to do something for me," she says.

I drift closer.

"I need you to still be here when I get back."

One leaf moves before I even think about it.

Yes.

She exhales, something like relief crossing her face.

"Good. Because I—" She stops. Starts again. "I don't know how to explain this to anyone, but this flat is the first place I've felt... not alone. In a long time."

She touches one of the fake leaves gently.

"So please," she says. "Don't go anywhere."

I move the leaf again. Harder this time.

Yes. I promise.

She smiles. Small, but real.

"Thank you."

She stands. Looks around the room one more time.

"I'm leaving early," she says. "Flight's at 6 AM. I probably won't have time to say goodbye properly."

She walks to the desk. Pulls out the notebook—the one with all the questions.

Tears out a page.

Writes something.

Folds it.

Places it on the floor between the two plants.

"Read it after I leave," she says. "Or don't. Whatever you want."

She goes to the mattress. Lies down.

Pulls the blanket up.

"Goodnight," she says to the ceiling.

A pause.

"I'll see you in a week."

Not goodbye.

See you.

Like it's certain.

Like she's already decided she's coming back.

I make the air as warm as I can. Let it wrap around her like a blanket I can't hold.

She closes her eyes.

I stay near the ceiling all night, staring at the folded note on the floor.

I don't read it.

Not yet.

Because once I do, she'll really be leaving.

And I'm not ready for that.

She leaves at 4:30 AM.

I hear her phone alarm go off in the dark. She sits up immediately—no grogginess, no hesitation. Like she didn't sleep at all.

She changes quietly. Brushes her teeth. Ties her hair back with the pen.

Picks up the duffel bag.

Stands at the door.

Looks back at the room one last time.

At the crack. At the mattress. At the plants.

At my corner.

"Bye," she whispers.

Then she's gone.

The door clicks shut.

The lock turns.

Footsteps fade down the stairs.

The gate creaks.

Silence.

I drift to the floor.

To the folded note between the plants.

Push it open carefully.

Her handwriting is messier than usual. Written fast, or emotional, or both.

It says:

I don't know if you can read this. I don't know if you'll even try. But just in case:

Thank you for being here. For answering. For listening. For not leaving when I probably wouldn't blame you if you did.

I'm going to Bangalore, but I'm not staying. This is my home now. You are my home now.

I'll be back in seven days.

Please don't fade.

—Priya

I read it three times.

Then I float to the window and watch the street below.

The sky is still dark. A few early risers. A stray dog. An auto-rickshaw rattling past.

No sign of her.

She's already gone.

The flat is silent.

I am alone.

Again.

The rope in my chest pulls tighter than it ever has.

Seven days.

I don't know if I can last seven days.

Not because I'll disappear.

But because I don't know how to be here without her anymore.

Seven Days

Day One.

The flat doesn't feel empty right away.

Her things are still here. The mattress, still wrinkled where she slept. The chai mug by the sink, unwashed. The real plant by the balcony, damp soil from this morning's watering.

The note, still on the floor between the plants.

I'll be back in seven days.

I read it again. And again.

Seven days is nothing. I've been here twenty-seven years. What's a week?

But the hours stretch differently now.

By noon, the sun has moved across the room in its usual path, but no one's here to see it. No footsteps on the stairs at 7 PM. No key in the lock. No "Hi" to the crack.

Just me.

And the clock I don't have but can feel anyway, counting down.

Six days left.

Day Two.

The silence gets louder.

I didn't think that was possible, but it is. When you're used to someone talking—to the ceiling, to the plants, to you—the absence of that voice becomes its own kind of noise.

I drift from corner to corner. Ceiling to floor. Window to door.

Nothing to do. No one to do it for.

Around 3 PM, the neighbor's pressure cooker whistles. Somewhere downstairs, a child screams-laughs. Life continues.

I hover by the fake plant.

Move one leaf.

No one sees it.

I move it again. Harder.

Still nothing.

For twenty-seven years, I've been invisible. I'm used to it.

But Priya made me visible. Not to the world—just to her.

And now that she's gone, I'm invisible again.

Even to myself.

Five days left.

Day Three.

I try to leave.

Not far. Not foolish. Just to the staircase. To see if the rope has loosened. If maybe, without her here, the flat's hold on me has weakened.

I push.

Make it to the threshold.

The rope yanks.

I'm back inside before I can even process the pain.

The room spins. Or I do. Hard to tell.

I hover near the ceiling, shaking in a way that doesn't make sense for something without a body.

The flat isn't just my prison.

It's my only place.

And she's not in it.

Four days left.

Day Four.

I start talking to the crack.

Not because I expect an answer. I never have. But because Priya used to, and the silence is unbearable now.

"She said seven days," I tell the plaster woman. "It's been four."

The crack says nothing.

"Do you think she'll actually come back?"

Silence.

"Or do you think she'll realize Bangalore is better? Family, friends, people who can actually talk back?"

The woman's face stares at nothing.

"I wouldn't blame her," I continue quietly. "If she stayed. I wouldn't."

But even as I say it, the rope in my chest tightens.

Because I would.

I'd blame her.

I'd blame myself.

I'd blame this flat, this city, this death that won't let me go.

Three days left.

Day Five.

Her phone charger is still plugged in by the mattress.

I notice it for the first time. The cable, coiled neatly. Waiting.

She forgot it.

Or left it on purpose.

A reason to come back.

I hover near it. Don't touch it. Can't.

But it feels like proof.

She's coming back.

She has to.

Two days left.

Day Six.

The real plant is dying.

Not dramatically. Just... wilting. The leaves are drooping. The soil is dry.

She watered it before she left, but that was six days ago.

I try to help.

Push at the water bottle she left on the desk. It tips. Spills.

Water everywhere. None of it in the pot.

I try again with the mug by the sink. It's too heavy. Won't move.

The plant droops further.

I hover above it, helpless.

"I'm sorry," I tell it.

It doesn't answer.

One day left.

Day Seven.

I don't leave the window.

I've been here since 4 AM, watching the street below.

The sky lightens slowly. Grey to pale blue to the hazy yellow of Delhi morning.

People pass. Vegetable vendor. Chai wallah. Kids in school uniforms. Auto-rickshaws. Stray dog.

No her.

By noon, I'm still at the window.

By 3 PM, I start to panic.

By 5 PM, I'm convinced she's not coming.

The rope in my chest feels like it's fraying. Not loosening—unraveling. Like the only thing holding me together was the belief that she'd come back.

And now that belief is dying with the plant by the balcony.

The sun starts to set.

Orange light fills the room.

The crack glows.

I drift to the floor. Between the plants.

The note is still there.

I'll be back in seven days.

Seven days are over.

She's not here.

I close what passes for eyes and wait for the fade I've been afraid of my whole death.

Maybe this is it.

Maybe without her, I finally disappear.

Maybe that's better.

Then I hear it.

Footsteps.

On the stairs.

Slow. Tired.

But familiar.

A key scrapes in the lock.

The door opens.

She's there.

Duffel bag over one shoulder. Hair tied back. Kurta wrinkled. Eyes exhausted.

But here.

She drops the bag.

Looks around the room.

At the mattress. The desk. The crack.

At me.

"Hi," she says.

Her voice cracks slightly.

I move to the plant so fast I almost knock it over.

One leaf. Hard. Fast.

Yes. Hi. You're back. You came back.

She sees it move.

And smiles.

"Yeah," she says softly. "I'm back."

She walks to the plants. Crouches beside them.

Sees the dying real one. The spilled water on the desk.

"You tried to water it," she says, something like wonder in her voice.

One leaf.

Yes.

She laughs. Small. Tired. Real.

"Thank you."

She stands. Looks at my corner.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she says. "Flight got delayed. Then traffic. Then... everything."

She walks to the mattress. Sits.

"Bangalore was..." She stops. Starts again. "It was exactly what I thought it would be."

A pause.

"Everyone asking questions I didn't want to answer. Everyone expecting me to stay. To be someone I'm not anymore."

She looks at the ceiling. At the crack.

"I almost did," she admits quietly. "Stay. My mother cried when I said I was leaving. My cousin asked why I was in such a hurry. My aunt said, 'What's in Delhi that's so important?'"

She looks at the plant.

At me.

"I didn't know how to say, 'A ghost who moves plastic leaves and makes the air warm when I'm sad.'"

She smiles.

"So I just said, 'My life is there.'"

She lies back on the mattress.

Stares at the crack.

"And it is," she says. "My life. Here. With you."

I make the air as warm as I can.

She closes her eyes.

"I'm exhausted," she whispers. "But I'm home."

Home.

The word fills the room.

I stay by the plants all night, watching her sleep.

And for the first time in seven days, the rope in my chest doesn't hurt.

Because she came back.

She actually came back.

Chapter 7: The Night She Asked Why

The Days After Her Return

She doesn't ask right away.

For the first few days after she comes back, life in the flat settles into something that looks like normal from the outside.

Same mattress on the floor. Same chai in the morning. Same crack in the ceiling watching everything like it always has.

If someone glanced through the window, they'd see a tenant back from a trip, returning to routine.

Inside, everything feels different.

Priya moves slower now.

Not tired-slow. Careful-slow.

Like she's paying attention to things she used to miss. The way the air thickens near the balcony. The way it gets coldest by the desk at exactly 2 AM. The way shadows fall in corners that shouldn't have shadows.

She waters the real plant twice a day now, even though it doesn't need it. Just an excuse to crouch by the balcony and look at the fake one beside it.

Sometimes she touches the plastic leaves. Not to ask questions. Just to touch.

She straightens the list of rules on the wall even when it's not crooked.

Rereads the note she left before Bangalore—Please don't fade—then folds it smaller and tucks it into the notebook drawer.

She doesn't talk about Bangalore much.

"Wedding was fine," she tells the crack one night. "Too loud. Too much gold. Chinnu looked happy, though. That's what matters."

Another night: "Amma cried when I said I had to leave early. Said I'd changed. That Delhi made me cold."

She doesn't say whether her mother was right.

Another night: "My cousin's husband asked if I have a boyfriend. I said no. He said, 'Then why go back to Delhi? Stay here, we'll find someone for you.'"

She laughs, but it's hollow.

"I didn't know how to explain that I already have someone waiting for me."

She glances at my corner when she says it.

Not directly. Just a flicker of her eyes.

But I see it.

I don't know what to do with that.

Someone.

Not something. Not "a haunted flat" or "a cold spot" or "the ghost who moves leaves."

Someone.

I've been called a lot of things in twenty-seven years. Problem. Nuisance. Reason-the-rent-is-cheap. History.

No one's ever called me someone.

I stay close to her those first few days. Not hovering, not cold, not intrusive. Just... present. The way she is when she sits by the plants and doesn't ask questions, just exists near them.

She notices.

"You're quieter than usual," she says one evening, stirring dal on the small gas stove. "Not moving things. Not making it cold. Just... there."

She glances toward my corner.

"Is that because I left?"

I don't answer. Don't know how.

She nods like I did anyway.

"I'm sorry," she says. "For leaving without explaining. For being gone longer than I said."

She turns off the stove. Brings the dal to the mattress. Sits.

"I didn't think you'd..." She stops. Starts again. "I didn't think it would matter to you. If I was here or not."

I move to the plant. Push one leaf. Hard.

It mattered.

She stares at the leaf.

Then she sets the bowl down and presses her palms to her face.

"I'm an idiot," she says, muffled.

Two leaves.

No.

She laughs into her hands. Looks up.

"You're nicer than I deserve."

One leaf.

No. You deserve nice.

She doesn't ask what I mean. Just picks up the bowl and eats in silence.

But the air between us feels heavier now. Not bad-heavy. Weighted. Like something unspoken is pressing against the walls, trying to get out.

On Friday, she brings home a candle.

Not the small emergency kind. A proper one. White, thick, unscented.

She sets it on the floor between the plants and lights it.

Doesn't say anything. Just watches the flame.

I drift closer.

"I used to do this with my grandmother," she says after a while.
"Light candles. Sit in silence. She said it was for the dead. So they'd know we hadn't forgotten them."

She looks at the flame.

"I didn't really believe in that stuff. Ghosts, spirits, all of it. Thought it was just... tradition. Stories."

A pause.

"And then I moved here."

She looks toward my corner.

"And now I light candles and talk to plastic plants and make rules for a ghost I can't see."

She smiles faintly.

"My grandmother would've loved you."

I make the air around the candle flicker. Just a little. The flame dances.

She watches it, mesmerized.

"Can you... do that again?"

I do. The flame leans, straightens, leans again.

She exhales slowly.

"You're real," she whispers. "I mean, I knew that. But seeing it like this..."

She trails off.

For a long time, neither of us moves.

Then she blows out the candle.

"I want to ask you something," she says quietly. "But I don't know if you can answer."

I stay near the plant. Waiting.

"Not tonight," she adds. "I just... I need to know you're okay with being asked."

One leaf moves.

Yes.

She nods.

"Okay."

She doesn't ask that night.

But I know it's coming.

Saturday, she's restless.

Can't sit still. Cleans the flat even though it's already clean.
Rearranges the desk. Folds and refolds the blanket. Waters the plant three times.

By evening, she's pacing.

From the balcony to the mattress to the door and back.

I follow her movement from the ceiling, unsure what's wrong.

Finally, she stops in the middle of the room.

"I need to know," she says.

Not to the crack. To me.

"I've been thinking about it since I got back. Actually, since before. Since Bangalore. Since the landlord called this place 'history.'"

She turns to face my corner.

"Something happened here," she says. "Something bad. And you're still here because of it."

One leaf moves.

Yes.

She nods slowly, like she expected that.

"I want to understand," she says. "Not because I'm scared. Not because I'm going to leave. I just..."

She searches for words.

"I want to know you," she says finally. "Not just the you that moves leaves and makes the air warm. The you that was alive. The you that got stuck."

I don't move.

She waits.

"Is that okay?" she asks softly.

I hover near the plant, paralyzed.

She's asking me to go back. To the worst day. The worst moment.
The thing I've spent twenty-seven years trying not to think about.

The priest. The chanting. The rope tightening around my chest.
The moment I realized I wasn't leaving. Not then. Not ever.

How do I explain that with a plastic leaf?

The plant stays still.

She watches it. Sees the lack of movement.

"You don't have to," she says quickly. "I shouldn't have—"

One leaf moves. Slow. Uncertain.

I want to tell you.

I don't know how.

She stares at the leaf.

Then she walks to the desk. Pulls out the notebook. Tears out a
fresh page.

Comes back to the plants. Sits cross-legged on the floor.

Sets the page between us.

"Show me," she says.

I look at the blank page.

At her.

At the crack in the ceiling, which has watched everything and said
nothing for twenty-seven years.

And I realize:

I don't just not know how to tell her.

I don't know if I can.

Because saying it—showing it—making it real again—

That might be worse than staying silent forever.

The page stays blank.

Priya waits.

The candle from last night sits unlit between the plants.

The room holds its breath.

And I stay frozen in my corner, trapped between wanting her to know and being terrified of what happens when she does.

The Question

She doesn't push.

That's the thing about Priya I've learned over these weeks—she asks, then waits. Doesn't demand. Doesn't corner. Just leaves the door open and sits by it until you're ready to walk through.

The blank page stays on the floor between the plants all weekend.

She steps around it. Waters the real plant. Eats her meals. Goes to work. Comes back.

Doesn't move the page.

Doesn't ask again.

Just lets it sit there like an invitation I haven't RSVP'd("please respond") to.

Sunday night, she lights the candle again.

Same spot. Between the plants. The flame throws long shadows across the walls.

She sits beside it, knees pulled up, staring at nothing in particular.

"I've been thinking," she says to the flame. To me. "About Bangalore."

I drift closer. Listen.

"When I was there, my mother kept asking why I came back to Delhi so fast. 'What's the rush?' she said. 'Stay another week. Relax. Be with family.'"

She picks at a thread on her kurta.

"And I couldn't explain it. That being there made me feel like I was disappearing. Like everyone was talking at me but no one was actually seeing me."

She looks toward my corner.

"But here," she says quietly, "I feel seen. Even though you can't see me. Even though I can't see you."

The candle flickers. Not from me. Just from air.

"That's why I need to know," she continues. "Because you've seen me. The tired parts. The broken parts. The parts I don't show anyone."

She pauses.

"And I want to see you too. All of you. Not just the ghost. The person."

The flame steadies.

She looks at the blank page still sitting on the floor.

"Whenever you're ready," she says. "I'll be here."

Then she blows out the candle and goes to bed.

I stay by the page all night.

Staring at it like it might write itself if I wait long enough.

But it doesn't.

Because the story isn't in the page.

It's in me.

And I don't know how to get it out.

Monday passes in a haze.

She goes to work. I drift through the flat, useless and restless.

The page is still there.

Blank. Accusing.

I try once to move something—the pen on the desk. Maybe I can write. Push it across paper. Form letters.

The pen rolls. Falls. Clatters to the floor.

No letters. No words.

I can't write.

Can't speak.

Can't do anything but move leaves and make air cold and exist in the spaces between her breaths.

How do you tell a story when you have no voice?

She comes home late.

8 PM. Later than usual. Looks exhausted in a way that's not just physical.

Drops her bag. Doesn't take her shoes off right away. Just stands there.

"Bad day," she tells the crack.

She walks to the sink. Fills a glass. Drinks it all in one go.

Then she turns and looks at the page on the floor.

Still blank.

She picks it up. Stares at it. Crumples it slowly in her fist.

"It's okay," she says. "You don't have to."

She tosses the crumpled paper toward the corner where I keep my things—the books that fell once, the space that's mine.

"I shouldn't have asked," she says. "It's not fair. You don't owe me your pain just because I shared mine."

She sits on the mattress heavily.

"I'm sorry," she says.

And something in me breaks.

Not the rope. Not the tether to the flat.

Something else. Older. The part that's been holding the story in for twenty-seven years because no one ever cared enough to hear it.

But she cares.

She's sorry for asking.

And that's worse than anything.

I move to the crumpled paper.

Push it. Hard. Across the floor. Back toward her.

She looks up. Watches it roll to a stop near her foot.

Picks it up. Unfolds it.

Still blank.

She looks at me—at my corner—confused.

I move to the plant. One leaf. Fast.

I want to tell you.

She sets the paper down carefully.

"Okay," she says.

I move another leaf.

I can't write.

She nods slowly, understanding.

"You can't form words."

One leaf.

Yes.

She thinks for a moment.

"Can you... show me? Without words?"

I hesitate.

Then: one leaf.

Yes. Maybe.

She stands. Walks to the balcony. Looks at both plants. At the candle. At the page.

"Do you need something?" she asks. "To show me?"

I think.

The story isn't simple. It's not one object, one moment, one image.

It's the priest. The chanting. The incense. The feeling of being pulled in two directions. The moment the rope snapped tight and I couldn't leave.

How do I show all that?

The plant stays still.

She watches. Waits.

Then she has an idea.

"The candle," she says. "If I light it... can you make the flame do things? Show me through that?"

I move one leaf.

Maybe.

She nods. Lights the candle.

Sits in front of it.

"Okay," she says softly. "I'm ready."

I hover above the flame.

This is it.

Twenty-seven years of silence.

And now, somehow, I have to make fire tell the story words never could.

I focus.

The flame flickers.

Priya watches.

And I begin.

The flame grows taller first.

I make it stretch, reaching upward like it's trying to escape something.

Priya's eyes widen.

"You were... trapped?" she whispers.

One leaf moves beside the candle.

Yes.

The flame shudders. Splits into two smaller flames for just a second—me and something else. Someone else.

"There was someone with you," she says.

One leaf.

Yes.

The flame twists. Violent now. Erratic.

"They hurt you."

The leaf doesn't move.

Because it's more complicated than that.

They didn't mean to.

But they did anyway.

The flame steadies. Then goes cold-blue at the base for just a moment—unnatural, wrong.

Priya gasps softly.

"Something went wrong," she says. "A ritual? An exorcism?"

One leaf. Hard.

Yes.

The flame shrinks. Folds inward. Barely a flicker now.

"And you got stuck," she whispers.

One leaf.

Yes.

The flame dies.

Smoke rises. Thin. Grey. Fading.

Priya stares at the smoking wick.

Then she looks at my corner.

"You've been here ever since," she says. Not a question.

One leaf moves in the dark.

Yes.

She's quiet for a long time.

Then she lights the candle again.

The flame comes back. Small. Steady.

She looks at it. At me.

"How long?" she asks.

I don't know how to answer that.

Can't count to twenty-seven with leaves.

The flame stays still.

She nods like she understands.

"A long time," she says.

One leaf.

Yes.

She reaches out—slowly, carefully—and touches the floor near the candle. Near where I am.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

Her hand stays there. Palm flat on the floor.

Not trying to touch me. Just... close.

I make the air around her hand warm.

Not cold. Not ghost-temperature.

Warm.

Like a hand holding hers back.

Her breath catches.

"You're still here," she says softly. "After all that. You're still here."

One leaf.

Yes.

She wipes her eyes quickly. Smiles through whatever emotion is tightening her face.

"Thank you," she says. "For telling me. For trusting me."

The candle flickers.

She looks at it.

Then at me.

"Can I ask you one more thing?"

I move one leaf.

Yes.

She takes a breath.

"Do you want to leave?" she asks. "If you could. If the... rope, or whatever it is... if it broke. Would you go?"

The question I've been afraid of for twenty-seven years.

The one I don't have an answer to.

Because I wanted to leave. For so long. Tried everything.

But now—

Now leaving means leaving her.

And I don't know which is worse anymore.

Being stuck.

Or being free without her.

The plant stays still.

Priya watches. Waits.

When nothing moves, she nods.

"You don't know," she says gently.

After a long pause: one leaf.

Yes. I don't know.

She smiles sadly.

"Yeah," she says. "Me neither."

She blows out the candle.

Lies down on the mattress.

"Goodnight," she whispers.

I make the air warm around her.

And stay by the plants all night, staring at the space where the flame was.

Wondering if wanting to stay and being unable to leave are the same thing.

Or if, after twenty-seven years, I've finally forgotten the difference.

What He Cannot Say

The next morning, she doesn't mention the candle.

Doesn't mention the flame-story I tried to tell. Doesn't ask follow-up questions.

Just wakes at 6:15, says "Morning" to the crack, and goes about her routine like nothing happened.

But something has changed.

I can feel it in the way she moves. Softer. More careful. Like she's walking around an injury she can't see but knows is there.

Mine.

She makes chai. Sits by the balcony with it. Looks at the fake plant.

"I dreamed about fire last night," she says casually. "Not scary fire. Just... a flame. Trying to tell me something."

She sips her chai.

"I think I understood some of it. But not all."

One leaf moves.

Yes.

She nods.

"That's okay. I don't need all of it."

She stands. Gets ready for work. Ties her hair with the pen.

Before she leaves, she pauses by the plants.

"Thank you," she says quietly. "For trying."

Then she's gone.

I spend the day near the ceiling, restless.

The flame helped. A little. But it wasn't enough.

There are pieces of the story I couldn't show. Can't show.

The priest's face. The words he chanted. The exact moment I realized I wasn't just dying—I was being trapped. The way the air turned solid around me. The rope, invisible and permanent, locking me to this room.

The fear.

The anger.

The twenty-seven years of watching people come and go and never stay.

Until her.

How do you show someone all of that when you can't form a single word?

She comes home earlier than usual.

6:45 PM. Still light outside. She's carrying a plastic bag—groceries, maybe, or something from the market.

She sets it down. Pulls out a notebook.

Not hers. A new one. Thin. Cheap. The kind they sell at stationary shops for twenty rupees.

She walks to the plants. Sets the notebook on the floor between them.

Opens it to the first page.

It's not blank.

She's written something.

I drift closer to see.

QUESTIONS I WON'T ASK OUT LOUD

Below it, a list in her handwriting:

1. What was your name?
2. How old were you?
3. Did it hurt?
4. Do you remember what you looked like?
5. Are you angry?
6. Are you scared?
7. Do you hate being here?
8. Would you leave if you could?
9. Am I keeping you trapped?
10. Do you want me to go?

She sits beside the notebook. Doesn't look at it. Just stares at the real plant, which has grown two more leaves since she came back from Bangalore.

"I wrote these down," she says, "because I realized something."

She pulls her knees up. Wraps her arms around them.

"You can't answer them. Not really. Not with one leaf or two. These aren't yes-or-no questions."

She glances at my corner.

"And I don't want to torture you with things you can't say."

One leaf moves.

Thank you.

She smiles faintly.

"But I also realized," she continues, "that maybe you don't need to answer them. Maybe I just needed to ask. To let you know I'm thinking about them."

She picks up the notebook. Flips through the pages. All blank except the first.

"If you ever figure out how to answer," she says, "you can use this. However you want. Move things. Make patterns. I don't know. We'll figure it out together."

She sets the notebook back down.

Stands.

Walks to the desk and pulls out the old notebook—the one with the rules, the questions she's asked before.

Brings it back to the plants.

Opens it to a page I haven't seen.

It's dated. Three weeks ago. Right after I tried possessing the sparrows.

She's written:

Sometimes I wonder if he's lonely. If ghosts can be lonely. If he watches me leave every morning and wonders if I'll come back. If he wishes he could leave too. If he hates me for being able to walk out the door when he can't.

She looks at my corner.

"I wrote that after I noticed you'd been... different. Quieter. I didn't know about the sparrows then. But I knew something had changed."

She flips to another page. More recent. Right before Bangalore.

If I go to the wedding, will he still be here when I get back? Can ghosts fade from loneliness? Can I?

She closes the notebook.

"I ask you questions with the plant," she says. "But I've been asking myself questions about you this whole time."

She sits back down.

"And I realized we're both trying to understand the same thing."

She looks at the ceiling. At the crack.

"What it means to be stuck. What it means to stay. What it means when leaving and being left behind hurt the same amount."

The room is silent except for the distant traffic outside.

She picks up the new notebook again. Flips to a blank page near the back.

Tears it out.

Writes something.

Folds it.

Places it beside the fake plant.

"You don't have to read it now," she says. "Just... when you're ready."

She stands. Stretches. Goes to make dinner.

I stay by the plants, staring at the folded note.

I don't open it right away.

Not because I'm not curious. Because I'm afraid.

She's given me something. Words I can read but can't say back.
Thoughts she's had about me that I'll never be able to match.

It feels uneven. Unfair.

But around midnight, when she's asleep and the flat is dark except for the streetlight glow, I drift to the note.

Push it open carefully.

Her handwriting is smaller tonight. More careful.

It says:

I don't know what happened to you. Not all of it. Maybe I never will.

But I know this:

You've been here for a long time. Alone. Watching people leave.
Watching the city change. Watching everything move except you.

And then I came. And you didn't scare me away. You could have.
You tried, maybe, at first. But you stopped.

You let me stay.

You moved leaves when I asked questions. You made the air warm
when I was sad. You tried to water my plant when I was gone.

You've been more present in my life than anyone I've actually seen
in the last year.

So I don't care what your name was. Or how you died. Or how old
you were.

I care that you're here. That you stayed. That you let me stay too.

Thank you.

—P

I read it three times.

Then I make the air around the note warm—not cold, not
ghostly—warm, the way I do when I want her to know I'm listening.

The paper doesn't move. But I stay near it all night.

And for the first time in twenty-seven years, I don't feel like a
ghost.

I feel like someone.

Someone she knows.

Someone she chose.

Even without a name. Even without a voice.

Someone.

The next evening, she comes home with incense again.

Sandalwood. Same as before.

She lights it by the plants. Lets the smoke curl upward.

"My grandmother used to say," Priya begins, sitting beside the incense, "that the dead don't need our answers. They just need to know we remember them."

She watches the smoke.

"I don't think you're dead," she says. "Not the way people usually mean it. You're here. You're listening. You're... you."

She glances at my corner.

"But I think maybe you've been waiting for someone to remember you. Not as 'the ghost in the flat.' As a person."

One leaf moves.

Yes.

She smiles.

"Then I'll remember you," she says simply. "Even if I never know your name. Even if you can't tell me everything. I'll remember that you were here. That you stayed. That you mattered."

The smoke drifts through me, and I feel something I haven't felt in twenty-seven years.

Not trapped.

Not stuck.

Not invisible.

Seen.

And maybe that's enough.

Maybe that's what I've been waiting for all along.

Words in Dust

It happens three days later, on a Thursday night.

Priya comes home exhausted. Not angry-tired or sad-tired. Just empty-tired. The kind where even talking feels like too much effort.

She drops her bag. Kicks off her shoes. Doesn't make chai. Doesn't eat. Just lies down on the mattress, fully dressed, staring at the ceiling.

"Long day," she tells the crack.

That's all.

I hover near the balcony, watching her breathe. Slow. Even. Not asleep, just... gone somewhere inside herself where I can't follow.

After a while, she turns on her side, facing the wall.

"I'm tired," she whispers. "Not just today. Just... tired."

I make the air warm around her shoulders.

She doesn't react. Maybe doesn't notice.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this," she says to the wall. "Pretend at work that I'm fine. Pretend to my family I made the right choice. Pretend to myself that living in a haunted flat talking to a ghost is normal."

My entire existence freezes.

"I'm not leaving," she adds quickly, like she can feel me panic. "I'm just... tired."

She closes her eyes.

"Sometimes I wish you could just talk to me. Like a real person. So I'd know I'm not crazy."

The words land heavier than anything she's ever said.

So I'd know I'm not crazy.

I've been here for twenty-seven years. I've scared tenants, confused landlords, been called a draft, a problem, a legend, a lie.

But no one's ever needed me to be real the way she does.

Not to prove ghosts exist.

To prove she's not broken for believing in me.

I drift to the desk.

There's dust there. Always is. Delhi dust settles on everything, no matter how often you clean.

I've moved objects before. Books, leaves, papers. Small things.

But I've never tried to write.

Not really.

Not deliberately.

The pen didn't work. My grip isn't strong enough, precise enough. I can roll it, knock it over. Can't hold it steady.

But dust...

Dust is already there. Already loose. Already waiting to be moved.

I focus.

Push at the layer of dust on the desk surface, near the edge where she'll see it when she sits up.

It takes effort. More than a leaf. More than cold air. I have to concentrate, direct the movement with intention, not just force.

The dust shifts.

A line.

Then another.

Slow. Shaky. Like a child learning to write.

It takes me ten minutes to form three letters.

But I do it.

Three letters in the dust.

HI

I hover above it, breathless in the way ghosts aren't supposed to be, staring at what I've done.

I wrote something.

Not much. Not enough. But something.

I drift back toward the mattress.

Priya is still facing the wall. Still tired. Still unreachable.

I make the air near her head cold. Just a little. Just enough to get her attention.

She shivers slightly.

"Stop," she mumbles. "Too tired to play twenty questions."

I do it again. More deliberately.

She sighs. Turns over. Looks at my corner with half-open eyes.

"What?"

I move to the desk. Make the air cold there instead.

She frowns.

"The desk?"

Cold pulse.

Yes.

She sits up slowly. Confused. Walks to the desk.

Looks down.

Freezes.

Stares at the two letters in the dust.

"Hi," she whispers.

Then she looks at my corner, eyes wide.

"Did you... did you write this?"

One leaf on the plant across the room moves.

Yes.

Her hand goes to her mouth.

"You wrote it," she says, voice shaking. "You actually wrote a word."

One leaf.

Yes.

She reaches out, fingers hovering above the dust, not touching.

"Hi," she says again, this time to me.

Then she laughs—sudden, watery, half-disbelieving.

"Hi," she repeats. "You said hi. Oh my god. You said hi."

She sits in the desk chair, staring at the letters like they might disappear.

"Can you..." She hesitates. "Can you write more?"

I move back to the desk.

Focus again.

It takes longer this time. My energy—or whatever keeps me tethered—feels thinner now. Harder to direct.

But I manage.

One more word.

STAY

She reads it. Goes very still.

"Stay," she whispers.

Then she looks at me.

"You want me to stay?"

One leaf. Hard. Fast.

Yes.

Her eyes fill with tears.

"I'm staying," she says. "I told you. I'm not going anywhere."

I push at the dust again. Slower now. Struggling.

TIRE

She stares at the word.

"You're tired?" she asks softly.

One leaf.

Yes.

"Me too," she whispers.

She reaches out and gently smooths the dust with her hand, erasing the words.

Then she looks at the blank space.

"Can you write something else? Anything?"

I try.

Focus everything I have left.

The dust shifts.

One letter. Then two. Then three.

It takes everything.

But I write it.

YOU

She reads it. Breath catches.

"Me?"

One leaf.

Yes.

She wipes her eyes.

"What about me?"

I'm too tired to write more. Too drained. The effort of forming letters, of making something last longer than a flicker or a cold spot—it's more than I've done in years.

But I try one more time.

Push at the dust with everything I have left.

One word.

REAL

She stares at it.

Then she understands.

"You think I'm real," she says, voice breaking.

One leaf.

Yes.

"And you needed me to know," she continues, tears falling now, "that you're real too."

One leaf.

Yes.

She stands. Walks to the plant. Crouches beside it.

Looks at my corner. At me.

"You're real," she says firmly. "You're the most real thing in my life right now."

She wipes her face with her sleeve.

"And I'm not crazy. Neither are you. We're just... two people who got stuck. And found each other."

She reaches out and touches the fake leaf I've been moving for weeks.

"Thank you," she whispers. "For learning how to say hi."

I make the air warm around her hand.

She smiles through the tears.

"Hi," she says again.

And even though I can't write anymore, even though the dust is gone and my energy spent, I stay close.

Because she's real.

And I'm real.

And for the first time in twenty-seven years, that feels like enough.

That night, she doesn't go to bed right away.

She sits at the desk, staring at the smooth surface where the words were.

Then she takes out the new notebook—the one she gave me for questions.

Writes something on the first blank page.

Leaves it open on the desk.

"In case you want to try again," she says. "No pressure. Just... if you can."

She goes to the mattress. Lies down.

"Goodnight," she says.

Not to the crack this time.

To me.

I make the air warm.

She smiles in the dark.

And I drift to the desk and look at what she wrote.

If you can write in dust, maybe someday you can write here too.
Take your time. I'm not going anywhere.

—P

I hover above the notebook.

It would take everything to try. To form letters again. To push past the exhaustion.

But maybe tomorrow.

Or the day after.

Or someday.

Because now I know I can.

And that changes everything.

Chapter 8: Her Confession

She wakes at 6:15, like always.

Reaches for her phone. Checks the time. Groans softly.

"Morning," she says to the crack.

I make the air warm near her pillow.

She smiles, eyes still closed.

"Morning to you too."

It's been two weeks since I wrote in the dust.

Since then, I've managed three more words. SHORT. OKAY. NIGHT.

Not conversations. Not stories. Just... breadcrumbs. Proof I'm here. Proof I'm trying.

She doesn't push for more. Doesn't ask questions I can't answer.

Just reads whatever I manage to write, says "Got it" or "Me too" or "Goodnight," and goes about her day.

It's enough.

More than enough.

This morning, she sits up slower than usual. Stretches. Yawns.

"I had the weirdest dream," she tells the ceiling.

I drift closer.

"I was walking through the city, and every building was empty. Just... hollow. No people. No furniture. Just walls and windows."

She swings her legs off the mattress.

"But I wasn't scared. It felt... peaceful."

She stands. Walks to the balcony. Opens the door.

The morning air rushes in—cool, smoggy, alive with distant traffic sounds.

She leans against the frame, looking out at the buildings across the street.

"I think I'm starting to like it here," she says quietly.

One leaf moves.

Good.

"Not just the flat," she continues. "Delhi. The noise. The chaos. The way nothing ever stays the same."

She turns back toward the room. Toward me.

"I think I needed that. To be somewhere that doesn't care if I fit in or not."

She walks to the plants. Crouches beside them.

"You helped with that, you know."

I make the air warm around her.

She touches the real plant—five leaves now, bright green, thriving.

"I keep thinking about what you wrote. 'You. Real.'" She pauses. "I think that's what I needed to hear. From anyone. Even a ghost."

She stands.

"Thank you."

One leaf.

Welcome.

She makes chai. Toast with butter. Sits at the desk while she eats.

I drift near the window, watching the city wake up.

Auto-rickshaws honking. A street vendor setting up his cart. A woman hanging laundry on a neighboring balcony.

The same sounds. The same sights. Twenty-seven years of the same morning, different people.

But this morning feels different somehow.

Lighter.

Priya finishes her toast. Rinses her cup. Gets ready for work.

She ties her hair with the pen. Checks her bag. Puts on her shoes.

Then she pauses by the door, like she always does.

Looks back at the flat.

At the plants. The desk. The crack in the ceiling.

"See you tonight," she says.

One leaf moves.

Yes.

She smiles.

Opens the door.

Leaves.

The lock clicks behind her.

I hover near the center of the room.

The flat is quiet now. Just the hum of the fridge. The distant traffic.
The faint creak of the building settling.

I drift to the balcony.

The sun is higher now. Bright. Warm.

It streams through the open door, cutting across the floor in a long rectangle of light.

I move toward it.

The warmth doesn't burn me the way it used to. Doesn't push me back.

I drift closer.

The light touches me—or passes through me—I can't tell which.

But I feel it.

For the first time in twenty-seven years, I feel it.

Not cold. Not trapped. Not heavy.

Warm.

Free.

I look back at the room.

The plants. The mattress. The desk with the notebook still open.

The crack in the ceiling where I used to hide.

I've been staring at that crack for twenty-seven years.

Waiting.

For someone to see me. To hear me. To stay.

And she did.

She stayed.

And now...

Now I don't need to wait anymore.

I drift to the crack one last time.

Hover there, in the corner where the ceiling meets the wall.

The place I've called mine for longer than I can remember.

The rope—the invisible thing that's held me here—feels different now.

Lighter.

Looser.

Like a knot that's been slowly untying itself, thread by thread, and I didn't notice until now.

I pull at it.

Not hard. Just... gently.

And it gives.

It gives.

I pull again.

The rope unravels.

Falls away.

I'm still here. Still in the flat. But I'm not tied anymore.

I could leave.

I could drift through the wall, past the balcony, into the city, into the sky, into whatever comes next.

I could go.

The sunlight is brighter now.

It fills the room, warm and golden, stretching across the floor, the walls, the ceiling.

I drift into it.

Let it surround me.

It doesn't hurt.

It feels like waking up.

Like the moment before sleep when everything goes soft and quiet and safe.

I think of her.

Priya.

Walking to the metro. Earbuds in. Thinking about work, or lunch, or the dream she had.

Not knowing.

Not needing to know.

I hope she has a good day.

I hope she comes home tonight and makes chai and talks to the plants and doesn't notice, at first, that the air feels different.

I hope she keeps the real plant alive.

I hope she keeps writing in the notebook.

I hope she stays.

Not for me.

For herself.

The sunlight is everywhere now.

The crack in the ceiling blurs.

The room blurs.

I don't fight it.

I let go.

And for the first time in twenty-seven years, I feel the rope fall away completely.

I'm not trapped.

I'm not stuck.

I'm not waiting.

I'm just...

here.

And then—

not.

The flat is quiet.

Sunlight streams through the balcony door.

The plants sit on the floor, five bright green leaves catching the light.

The notebook lies open on the desk, waiting.

The crack in the ceiling is just a crack.

Empty.

Peaceful.

Gone.

THE END