

WE BURN LIKE CANDLES

Written by NAG



The still flame

The apartment wore silence like a seasoned actor wore old makeup— thin, cracked, but stubborn in its presence. Yellow light from a single crooked lamp spilled across the wooden floor like honey forgotten in the sun. Dust floated lazily, unbothered by time or memory.

The vinyl record spun in eternal repetition—one note caught in a loop like a tongue refusing to speak a name.

The Man sat in a chair by the window, his silhouette framed against a curtain that hadn't been washed since she left. He held a glass of sparkling water with lemon in his hand. It had been poured an hour ago. Still full. Water droplets running hazy on the sides, dripping. The bubbles? Dead.

The city lived on the other side of the glass—cars hummed, sirens whispered, someone laughed too loudly from a balcony too close. But inside, the world had settled into the posture of waiting.

He didn't check the clock anymore. What difference would it make? The waiting wasn't for a time. It was for a moment. For a *presence*. For a ripple in the air that would make him stand, open the door, and—

Bell rings.

Not rushed. Not repeated. Just one.

A knock would've begged. A buzz would've barked. But the bell— it *remembered* how to hurt.

He didn't flinch. But something inside him adjusted, as if a broken compass had just remembered which way pointed *back*.

He stood, leaving the glass untouched. The chair exhaled.

Each step toward the door felt like approaching a mirror he didn't trust. The kind that might reflect not just his face, but all the unfinished versions of himself.

And then—he opened it.

A Woman.

Hair like she'd run through a storm that loved her too much. Eyes loud, untamed. A smirk that whispered violence and history in the same breath.



She stood like she never left.

Like this door *owed* her.

The hallway behind her went silent. The air bowed slightly, as if it knew.

“I buried you.” His voice was low, gravel beneath his breath. He didn’t blink, but something in his jaw clicked—the restraint of someone tasting old fire.

Her smile cracked. Not fell, *cracked*. Like glass tested by the wrong kind of memory. Her eyes didn’t waver. They shimmered. But not with tears, with recognition.

“I died. But only to you. (pauses) Miss me?” She tilted her head slightly, almost playful. Her hands stayed still by her sides, but her fingers twitched—like they expected a door to be slammed in their face.

“I don’t miss migraines.” He folded his arms, one foot casually slipping back like a boxer staying planted. His eyes, though, searched her like a map he promised never to follow again.

There it was. The first slice. She tasted the blood of it, smiled deeper.

She stepped in without being asked. And he, let her. His body didn’t protest, but his silence did.

The door closed behind them, not with a thud, but a sigh.



Fire doesn't ask permission

The air inside the apartment changed the moment she entered. It didn't just fill with her perfume or the whisper of the outside world trailing behind her—it *remembered* her. Every molecule. Every sharp inhale the walls had once taken when she screamed. Every soft exhale they held when she touched his face in the dark.

She dropped her bag.

Not a statement. A reminder. A challenge. Her eyes stayed fixed on him while the thud echoed—testing the floor, testing his heart.

She walked in slow circles, the way a predator paces its old hunting ground. Her fingertips grazed the edges of furniture that hadn't moved in months. Same table. Same chair. Same time-stamped grief.

"Still decorating with grief? Place smells like unfinished business." She didn't look at him when she said it. Her eyes were scanning the apartment—taking inventory. Of what she left. Of what he didn't move. Her tone was light, but her shoulders were braced like she expected a retaliation.

He watched her the way one watches a storm form over familiar waters. Not surprised. Just... accepting of the flood. His fingers tapped once on the rim of the untouched glass before curling inward again.

"You'd know. You specialize in exits without closure." His words came flat, not sharp. But his gaze lingered at the edge of her cheekbone, as if looking for scars he didn't leave.

Her lips curled—half amusement, half apology, with no intent to deliver either. She tilted her chin up slightly, almost defiant.

"Same table. Same chair. Same man pretending he's moved on." She let her hand slide across the top of the table, dragging the pads of her fingers like reading Braille from the past. Her touch lingered for a second too long on the spot she once spilled wine over—years ago.

"Same lipstick shade. Still using red to scare the truth away?" He cocked his head just a little. His eyes dropped to her mouth for only a second before finding their way back to hers. The smirk he gave was barely there, but it bruised.

She stopped walking. Turned slowly. Her hair swung with her like a curtain falling.



This time, her smirk was less weapon, more wound. Her hands tightened into fists, relaxed, then folded across her chest—her shield.

“I came because you deserve the courtesy of hearing it from me.” She didn’t break eye contact. Not once. Her voice was steady, but her breath paused afterward—held, as if waiting for permission to continue.

“What? Another lie in a new accent?” His brow arched, but his body leaned forward just enough to betray curiosity. His arms dropped to his sides, but not relaxed—ready.

“I sold it.” She said it like throwing a rock into a frozen lake—knowing it would crack something. Her shoulders fell a fraction of an inch, like she’d finally put something down.

“...Sold what?” His voice thinned out. He wasn’t ready for the answer, but his eyes narrowed like he was bracing.

“The only thing you ever gave me that meant anything.” She exhaled after she said it. Not relief. Release. Her jaw tensed after, though—regret trailing her words like a shadow.

He blinked once, like rewinding a thought. Then looked past her, toward the hallway—as if the painting might still be there, waiting.

“The painting.” His hand lifted slightly, then dropped, as if muscle memory had tried to point at something now absent.

“Framed with rage, brushstrokes of guilt. It’s hanging in someone else’s hallway now. And I stood there, cash in hand, wondering if you’d feel it the moment it left me.” She looked at the floor as she said the last part, as if she didn’t want to see the answer on his face. Her shoulders curved inward, just slightly.

Silence.

Not the kind that empties. The kind that *presses*. Takes air out of lungs and walls alike.

“I couldn’t carry it anymore. It was heavier than it looked.” She looked up again, her eyes softer now. Honest. Raw.

“So you sold it?” He said it like a question and a sentence. The kind of line you say when you know the answer but want to punish it anyway.

“No. I let it go. Selling was just... punctuation.” She smiled. But it trembled. Not her lips—her eyes.

He didn’t.



He just stood there, hands hanging by his sides like they didn't know what to do anymore.

She moved toward the small corner shelf. The apartment didn't creak—it *held its breath*. Her fingers found the tin of chocolate wafers they once hoarded like love notes in edible form. She opened it. Slowly. Like reopening a wound just to see if it still bled.

She took one. Looked at him. Extended the tin.

"Wafer?" Their fingers brushed as he took it. No tremble. But something passed between them—something soft edged with razors.

They ate in silence. The crunch echoed through the room like a remembered laugh. Like a memory being chewed slowly, painfully.

The taste was nostalgia soaked in regret.

She stared at the empty tin in her lap. Her thumb circled the edge absently, her mind somewhere years ago, where laughter was easier and wounds hadn't yet learned their names.

"I thought I came for closure. But maybe I just wanted to see if I still made the room colder." Her voice wasn't bitter. It was wondering. Like she wasn't sure what she expected to find. Her eyes didn't meet his yet—too afraid she'd see the answer before she wanted to know it.

He didn't smile. But his jaw clenched for just a beat. Like bracing against an old wind.

"You do. But I keep the windows shut now." He wiped the wafer crumbs onto his jeans. Slowly. A ritual. His fingers lingered too long—remembering warmth he hadn't touched in months.

She finally looked at him. Not through him—at him. Like measuring a scar she had stitched but never cleaned.

"Maybe I came because no one else ever fought me like you did." There was no pride in her words. Just gravity. Her arms folded—not defensively, but to stop them from shaking.

"Also... no one else fought for you like I did. Besides, I bled next to you." His voice softened, yet beneath it was steel. He didn't take a step toward her. But his gaze did.

"Same thing, really." She stood. Slow. Like rising from something heavier than furniture. Walked to the bin. Threw the wrapper in. It spun once before landing like a verdict.

She didn't turn around immediately. Her hands rested on the counter as if bracing her weight. Then—



She spoke. *“I thought I’d come here, throw one last stone, maybe shatter whatever pieces of you were still pretending. But all I did was miss the way we broke.”*

Her voice cracked—not audibly, but in the silence that followed. She turned, eyes shining with something older than tears.

He stayed still, shoulders squared but spine tired. His throat moved before he spoke, as though the words had to fight their way out. *“Funny. I spent so long trying to sweep up what we left behind... Turns out we’re still standing in the glass. We’re still shattered.”*

She stepped closer. Not like a lover. Like someone walking barefoot through a battlefield. Deliberate. Respectful. *“I told myself you’d ruin me. And you did—right down to the parts I didn’t know could break. Still... I had to see you breathe. One last time.”*

He didn’t flinch. But his hands—his hands gripped the side of the chair like he might fall without it.

MAN I told myself you’d vanish. So completely I’d forget your voice. But I still flinch when someone says your name.

Now her breath caught. Subtle. A skipped beat.

WOMAN We were each other’s punishment. I’ve made peace with that. I just don’t think we ever knew what crime we committed.

MAN Sometimes, all the love I gave only returned as agony.

His voice dropped an octave. Not anger. Just truth arriving with weight.

WOMAN And sometimes, all the silence I endured was your version of affection. When I was burning just to keep you warm... did you even notice the fire was me?

She didn’t wait for a reply. Her eyes closed—like the question wasn’t for him, but for herself.

MAN I noticed. I just kept hoping you’d never run out of flame. You say you need time and care from me, yet you weren’t available to receive it in person...

He took one small step toward her. Not to close the gap. Just to let her know he could.



WOMAN Because when I was there, you gave me time like it was charity, and care like it was debt. Why did I always have to guess how you felt — like your love came in riddles I had to solve just to feel safe?

MAN I thought if I gave you answers, you'd stop needing me.
 So I kept it vague — not to confuse you, but to keep you close.
 Because even when I did speak plainly, you'd fray...
 Pulled away by a mind that didn't know what to do with honesty it didn't expect.
 And I started thinking — why bother?
 Tell me this — does it make you feel like the bigger person,
 when your problems always seem heavier than what I carry in silence?

His tone sharpened—not out of spite, but frustration, years in the making.

WOMAN No. But you only noticed mine when it crushed you. You called me reckless. But tell me — what's more reckless than loving someone who can't say it back unless cornered?

Now she took a step. Arms still crossed. But her voice was fire.

MAN Saying it too soon, and watching them run. I didn't want to lose you by admitting I needed you. Why did it always feel like I was the only one bound to rules and restrictions?

WOMAN Because you built them to trap me. I just watched you get caught in your own design.
 Was I ever more than a mirror for you — something to reflect the version of yourself you could almost believe in?

MAN No. You were the only thing I ever saw clearly.

That hurt. More than she expected. Her lips parted. Then shut again.

MAN I sharpened every word just to survive you. I thought if I stayed cold enough, it'd stop cutting.



He sat now. Not tired. Just—done fighting gravity.

*WOMAN And I swallowed them just to stay near you. I thought if I kept bleeding quietly,
you'd stay softer.*

MAN I should' ve hated you sooner. Might' ve saved us both the echoes.

*WOMAN I should' ve walked out before you gave me a reason. Might' ve left the better
version of me behind.*

Their eyes didn' t meet now. But their voices still reached.

*MAN You always moved like you saw five steps ahead. I hated playing against you... And I
never trusted anyone else to play with.*

*WOMAN You never gave away your next move. Even when you were losing, you made it look like
part of the plan. I learned to sharpen myself watching you.*

Both exhaled.

The air shifted—barely, but enough for the dust in the light beam to shimmer, like breath had been drawn from the walls themselves. The apartment seemed to sag in the silence, the record player' s stuck note like a heartbeat on life support.

She looked toward the floor for a beat too long, her eyes flicking up like she regretted being vulnerable even for a second.

“We're not good for each other.” Said he while His voice was steady, but his hand clenched slightly at his side—muscle memory from years of wanting to reach for her, and never knowing how.

She didn' t respond right away. She let the sentence float. Land. Hurt.

Her shoulders fell, not in defeat, but as if something inside her had just stopped pretending. responds *“We're not good without each other either.”*

The room held its breath again. The lights above flickered, not from power loss, but from emotional weight. Like even the wiring couldn' t take the tension.



She turned, her spine straight but her steps unsure. Blinked fast. The kind of blinking that tries to stop tears from gathering speed. *"You hurt me."*

Each word left her like a confession. Her fingers brushed the edge of the doorframe, grounding herself.

"You taught me how." was his answer, his tone wasn't cruel. It was raw—like truth finally being honest with itself.

She tilted her head slightly, taking him in like it was the last page of a letter she had reread too many times.

"I never wanted to win. I just didn't want to lose first." Her voice softened at the end, as if she had just admitted it to herself.

He calmly utters *"Then we both lost. Elegantly."*

The light from the hallway spilled into the apartment like an intruder. She stepped into it, paused—her shadow long, her presence still stubborn in the room.

"The next time you show up, make it when I'm not here." He didn't mean it. Not fully. But he said it like he had to.

"The next time I show up, you better not let me in." she responds in quick succession. With a face equal parts of pain and anger.

Their eyes locked. What passed between them wasn't fury, or longing. It was the final echo of a storm—quiet, haunting, unforgettable.

"I'm walking out... with a heart half poisoned." She said it slowly. As if the syllables carried weight.

Shouts in his head, but chokingly says *"And I'm staying here... with a heart half loved."*

The door creaked open fully. She didn't look back. He didn't move.

He walked to the verandah. The outside light bleached his outline as he looked it into the air, the lights.

Only then —did his shoulders fall.

Then— only then —did he let his breath out.



Hearts of wax

The door had long closed.

But the room still held her shape. In the outline of her breath on the windowpane. In the rhythm of her footsteps echoing through his memory. In the silence—especially in the silence.

He stood at the window, staring into the void where the wrapper disappeared. A city blinked lazily beneath him, streetlights casting faint orange halos over people who weren't haunted. The world outside moved on in soft blinks and mechanical hums, but inside—he was caught in stillness.

His glass was still untouched. The condensation had dried.

He sat. Same chair. Same slouch. But this time, he didn't pretend to look composed. His spine curved inwards as if trying to hide the heart still echoing her name.

He slumped forward, elbows to knees, head to hands. The record had stopped completely now. No more stuck notes. Just that brittle nothingness that followed goodbye.

For minutes—or maybe hours—he didn't move. Stillness became its own punishment.

The air grew thicker. Dense with things unsaid.

He could still smell her. That faint mix of rain, dust, and the cinnamon oil she used on her wrists. It clung to the air like a perfume and a warning.

Across the city, she sat curled into a corner of a near-empty café, half a cup of coffee in front of her, untouched like his glass. She stared through the window—not out of it. Her reflection stared back, a ghost with wide eyes and trembling certainty.

Everywhere she looked, she saw him.

The man who once stood beside her like armour. The man who once walked away like she wasn't his wound.

Her phone buzzed. She didn't look. Her fingers tightened around the ceramic mug, seeking warmth it could no longer give.

The waitress asked if she wanted a refill. She blinked, smiled politely, shook her head. No voice. Not yet.



Back in the apartment, the man finally rose. Mechanical. Robotic. Each step toward the kitchen echoed like regret across the floor.

He poured the drink into the sink. Watched it swirl—his own hesitation liquified.

As the crystal liquid spiralled down the drain, he whispered—

“Useless, without someone to toast to.” His voice cracked like old vinyl. He ran a hand through his hair, disheveled and damp with sweat he hadn’t noticed—like his body had tried to cry in his place.

The apartment felt smaller now. As if her exit pulled the walls closer. The shadows had taken up residence. Every object now bore her fingerprints, her ghost lingering in corners she never touched.

He walked to the cupboard. Pulled out the old photo. The one they never framed because permanence scared them both.

Two faces. One smile between them.

He stared. His thumb brushed her cheek in the picture. Slow. Reverent.

“You always said I looked better in silence.”

He laughed once. Hollow. Echo-less.

Set the photo down.

Left the room. Not to escape—but to find air that wasn’t shaped like her.

She was back home now. Same sweater she wore that night—the one she never let him steal. It still smelled like old cigarettes and mango detergent. Familiar.

She tossed her bag on the couch, dropped beside it, and finally let the breath escape. That trapped breath from the doorway. It left her body like something sacred.

“(to herself) I walked out with half a heart, sure. But damn, it’s still beating for the wrong reasons.”

Her voice didn’t shake, but her fingers did.

She reached into the side pocket of her bag.

Pulled out a wrapper.



Not the one from tonight. An old one. The one she never threw away.

She unfolded it. It still had the crease from when he tucked it into her book years ago, after their first fight.

“For when words don’ t work.” Her whisper trembled. She smiled. Then cried. Softly. The kind of cry that doesn’ t make sound, just moisture. A river with no source, no end.

Her head fell against the cushion. Eyes closed. Memories replayed—not like films, but like bruises when pressed.

The man lay on the couch now, arm draped over his eyes. The city outside buzzed like nothing had changed. But inside him—a war.

His chest rose and fell like waves trying to break through a dam. His fingers dug into the cushions like he could find an answer between the threads.

His phone lit up once.

No message.

Just her name in a notification from years ago. A memory photo. The universe’s cruel algorithm.

He stared.

Pressed it.

A beach. Her laughing. His shadow behind her. Always behind. Never beside.

“You looked happiest when I wasn’ t in the frame.” He said it without venom. Just observation. But the sentence clung to his ribs like frost.

He locked the phone. Set it face-down. As if turning it over could turn over the past.

Across town, she sat at her piano. Keys dusty. Unplayed. A relic of their better days.

She pressed one.

D minor.

Held it.

“We were a song that only made sense in dissonance.” She played a second note. Off-key. Winced. Her fingers faltered, unsure whether they remembered or refused.



Then again.

And again.

Until it stopped hurting.

Until she could hear herself above the noise of him.

Until she could remember how her hands used to sing before they learned to hold heartbreak.

Some love stories don' t burn out. They smoulder beneath skin and bone.

And some silences aren' t peace. They' re just echoes too proud to speak first.



Ashes and Air

Mornings didn' t used to hurt.

But now they arrived like debt collectors — abrupt, unkind, and unapologetically bright.

He woke up sprawled across the couch, neck aching, dreams scrambled. The vinyl player still sat silent in the corner, the needle untouched, paused where grief had stopped it.

The dust in the room had multiplied overnight, or maybe he was just seeing it clearly for the first time. Each speck danced in the sunlight, tiny ghosts drifting through air thick with what-ifs. The light fell on the framed painting she never liked, now crooked. Everything in the room leaned slightly wrong, as if mourning in its own way.

He stretched, but not to greet the day — only to remind himself he still had limbs. Still had weight. Still existed, even if barely. His spine cracked as he sat up, body aching from both stillness and memory.

The photo on the table hadn' t moved. But it looked different now.

She looked different in it.

He stared at it again, the same way he used to look at her when she wasn' t watching — as if afraid that knowing would break the spell.

“(softly) What are we, if not two people who used to know each other’s passwords and nightmares?” His voice barely broke the stillness, but it cracked something in him.

Across town, she sat cross-legged on the wooden floor, every window open. The morning sun bathed the apartment in golden hues, but warmth was relative. A breeze wandered in and left quickly, as if it too couldn' t bear to stay.

The piano was open. Keys quiet. Her fingers hovered over them without landing.

She wasn' t trying to play.

She was just remembering.

Each key held a fight. A kiss. A silent dinner. A joke said too late. The middle C still had his thumbprint from the night they made up after nearly breaking for good.

Her body was still, but her mind was pacing.



She thought about texting him. Not to say anything grand — just a photo. Of something mundane they once argued over. Like the absurd shape of mango slices. The kind of message that didn't need a reply, only recognition.

But she didn't.

"He wouldn't get it anymore." And that hurt more than anything else.

The man stood by the sink now, washing a single glass. Not because he needed it clean — but because his hands needed purpose. The sound of water was the closest thing to conversation he could bear.

He looked around the apartment, finally noticing the stack of books she left behind. The ones he never opened. He picked one up. Flipped through it.

Dog-eared corners. Underlined phrases. Her handwriting in the margins.

"This reminded me of you." He smiled. The kind that had nowhere to go. It disappeared before it reached his cheeks.

Then closed the book.

He walked to the balcony and leaned against the railing. The city roared on below — so alive, so loud — a cruel contrast to the silence growing inside him. Somewhere, someone was laughing, and the sound hit him like a bruise. "(whispers) We used to laugh like that."

She dressed slowly that morning. Not for anyone. Just for the mirror.

Her hair fell messily around her shoulders. Her lips held no colour. But her eyes — her eyes were less glass, more mirror now. They didn't just reflect — they remembered.

She folded the sweater. The one he never got to keep. Placed it in the back of her closet like a finished chapter. Not discarded — just shelved.

Then, carefully, she took the old wrapper from her nightstand, held it once more, and placed it in a box with other keepsakes that no longer held function, only history.

He picked up the last wafer wrapper from the night before. Smoothed it out. Stared at the faint fingerprint she left behind.

"Funny how something so sweet ends bitter on the tongue."

He folded it twice.



Started to slip it into the book.

Paused.

Unfolded it.

Stared again.

His chest rose sharply, as if trying to hold in a memory too heavy to breathe through.

Then he walked to the varendah. Looked out.

Held the wrapper above the railing — a strange little flag for surrender.

And he let go.

The wind took it instantly. No ceremony. No spin. Just release.

He watched it until it disappeared.

This time, his smile stayed. Just a little.

She walked out of her apartment and let the morning swallow her. The world smelled like wet concrete and blooming things.

The past was not forgiven. Not forgotten.

But it no longer clawed at her skin.

Some stories do not end. They just sink deeper—like ink into old paper, fading yet permanent.

They linger in wafer-thin wrappers, in songs that ache unexpectedly, in margins of books no one touches anymore, in dust-heavy rooms where air still tastes like someone's name.

They do not shout. They wait. For the right kind of quiet. For a memory brave enough to bleed again.



Still Glowing

It's been weeks. Maybe months.

A different season has arrived — one that doesn't smell like endings, but like ripe beginnings stitched quietly into the breeze.

The air has changed its language. Softer now. Less urgent. The rain doesn't slam anymore; it lingers like an old friend at the doorstep, waiting to be remembered.

Neither of them are quite the same. But then again, who ever is?

The sky wears a soft shade of apology, like it too is learning how to forgive itself. Light tumbles into the world—not like an intruder, but like a friend who knocks first. The kind of morning that smells like roses after rain and something freshly unburdened.

He steps onto the same balcony. Not to mourn, but to breathe.

The air carries no echoes today. Just warmth. Just wind. Just now.

He doesn't flinch when her name crosses his mind. He lets it sit beside him. Like an old photograph. Faded, but never thrown away.

She's walking down a quiet street, coffee in hand, hair untied, a slight skip in her step—not because life is perfect, but because she survived it. The breeze flirts with her scarf. Somewhere, a child laughs. She smiles. Doesn't even try to stop it.

She remembers him—not with ache, but with awe. They loved with both hands and broke like lightning. But even storms pass. Even scars soften.

She doesn't hate him. She doesn't love him the same either.

But she honours what they were. The way you honour fire for both its warmth and the burn it left.

He's clearing his shelves today. Finds the book again. The one with her handwriting. He flips through it—slowly. Reverently. Until he lands on a page with no underlines, no scribbles, just blank.

He closes it gently.



"This one's mine," he murmurs.

And places it back. Not at the front. Not at the back. Just where it belongs.

She hums a tune as she waters her plants. A tune he once whistled at the window, thinking she couldn't hear. She always did. Some melodies don't fade—they fold into the background and make silence bearable.

She looks up at the sky.

"Be well," she says softly.

Not to him. Not exactly.

To everything that hurt and healed and tried its best.

We do not survive love by forgetting. We survive it by remembering with less fire. By speaking softly of what once screamed.

They were not the story. But they were a chapter worth underlining.

And though they could never find home in each other, they left the doors open long enough to teach one another how to walk out without slamming them.

Let that be enough. Let that be beautiful. Let that be half-loved, wholly lived.

Fin.

*What do you call a love that aches yet stays?
A burn that lingers through brighter days?
If silence speaks more than words ever could,
Was it ever broken, or just misunderstood?*

*Is love still love when it lives in the past?
Or just a shadow we carry too fast?
If two hearts burned and never forgave,
Was it love they shared, or the silence they gave?*

