

weak

REBORN

“If I could blame the world, I would-we  
all would”

-weak

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# prologue

Thoughts raced through my mind as I sat alone in the empty classroom, staring at nothing in particular. Does the impossible truly exist? If someone prays with all their heart, can they actually achieve their dreams? And even if they do—what’s the point, if by the time they succeed, they’re already old?

“Hey, don’t you wanna go home? Classes are over,” a classmate interrupted my thoughts.

I didn’t answer, just stood up and walked out. As I made my way home, a familiar warmth spread through my stomach, followed by the cold sweat that had become routine. I had felt this way too many times before.

By 5:00 PM, I was sitting in front of my laptop. *I still have an hour and a half*, I told myself.

Tension curled in my chest as the clock inched toward six. Maybe I should create something different today. But yesterday’s story was still unfinished.

*Maybe I should just kill myself.*

Then I wouldn’t have to create anything ever again.

But I want to live. To see another day, another love, another smile.

I just don’t know how much longer I can go on like this. I’m growing up. I have responsibilities now. But if I let go of this—this feeling, this pain—what will be left of me? Will all the sadness and sorrow disappear along with it?

I don’t want that.

I want this feeling to last for as long as I live. I want it to haunt me. Because, somehow, it’s the only thing that makes me feel alive.

# Dew-kissed blossom

The first day of school knotted my stomach, a strange, warm unease that wouldn't subside. I walked alone down the corridor, feeling the weight of the moment. Everyone else had already taken their seats, and I was running late.

As I entered the classroom, a wave of silence washed over me. I could feel their eyes on me, scanning me as I made my way to my usual spot. Then, the teacher called my name. "Introduce yourself," she said, even though I had been studying with these same kids for years.

The way schools work here is a bit different. The classmates you start with in the early years are the same ones you graduate with. No reshuffling, no new faces—just the same people, year after year.

With a shaky voice, I said my name as briefly as possible before hurrying to my seat—the last desk by the wall. I always preferred sitting in a corner, where it felt safe, like no one could bother me.

As the lessons began, conversations filled the room. Some boys at the front cracked jokes, slipping in words I knew were... inappropriate. What caught me off guard was the reaction—girls chuckling, amused by whatever they were saying.

I didn't understand. Weren't these bad words? So why were they laughing?

Then, one of them turned to me with a smirk. "Hey, let me borrow your glasses for a sec, I can't see the board."

The class erupted in laughter, though I had no idea why. I had worn glasses for as long as I could remember. What was so funny?

I've had a dust allergy since third grade, and it gradually worsened my eyesight.

I don't know why, but at that moment, I felt something strange in my chest—a feeling I had never experienced before.

After school, I went home to the rented house where we lived. It was quite spacious. My father worked as a residential painter, and my mother was a homemaker. I had two younger siblings—a brother and a sister—and being the eldest, my time with them was always lively. We often played hide-and-seek inside the house, and those moments were filled with laughter.

My father was a disciplined man—someone I had always looked up to. He was focused and determined in everything he did. My mother, on the other hand, was a source of warmth and joy—until we got into mischief.

Most of my time outside school was spent with my friends in the neighborhood. The moment I got home, I would toss my bag by the door and rush outside to play. Homework was never my priority—I was more interested in playing outside.

Back in school, during lunch break, the bell rang, and the teacher walked in. She was a Telugu teacher—somewhere in her late 40s. Strict and short-tempered, she was the kind of woman everyone in the school feared.

She carried a stack of papers that looked like test sheets.

Without saying much, she told everyone to stand up and started calling out names one by one.

As the list went on, I felt that familiar warm tightness in my stomach creeping back.

She called out every name except mine and one other girl's. Then she said, "The students whose names I didn't call, come to the front of the class."

I walked to the front as cold shivers ran down my neck, not knowing what was about to happen.

She scanned the room and said, "Applaud these two." The entire class started clapping, but I felt uneasy. I had seen her do something similar before—she once

made the class clap for two boys, only to mock them afterward, saying, "I told you to applaud them for being idiots."

As I stood there, unsure of what was coming next, she handed me my test paper and said, "You did well." I looked down and saw that I had scored full marks in all six subjects. It was surprising, considering I never did my homework and usually ended up getting punished for it. Yet, despite that, I had always been a top student, even serving as the class representative.

Some teachers overlooked my incomplete assignments, knowing I'd score well regardless. Over time, this made me more confident.

Everyone was talking about a fancy car they had seen outside the school. I jumped into the conversation and casually said, "My father actually owns a lot of cars."

They all looked at me skeptically and said, "Don't lie."

But I insisted, "I'm not lying."

And just like that, I started weaving a web of lies about being incredibly rich. Before long, people began looking at me as if I were on a different level.

And I loved it.

I loved the way they looked at me with admiration, as if I had something they could never have.

I didn't know why, but that feeling... I craved it.

After that day, the rumor about me being rich spread like wildfire among my classmates. At first, it felt good—like I had unlocked a new kind of attention. But I had no way of knowing what was coming next.

Some of the kids who had been to my house before—the ones who actually knew me well—saw right through my lie. They knew I wasn't rich. But instead of exposing me, they chose a different route. They decided to take advantage of my desperation to keep up the act.

During lunch break, a few classmates casually walked up to me.

“Hey, since you're so rich, why don't you buy us some snacks?” one of them asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

“No?” another one scoffed. “What do you mean, no? You're supposed to be loaded, right? Why don't you buy us whatever we want? Or... could it be that you're just pretending?”

A wave of panic shot through me. My heart pounded. If I refused, the truth would be out, and the status I had built would crumble in an instant.

I swallowed hard and forced out the words. “Okay... I will. Meet me after school.”

School ended.

Panic set in as I realized I had no money on me. In my family, the idea of pocket money didn't exist. If I ever needed something, I had to ask my father, and if he thought it was necessary, he'd buy it for me. I told myself I'd just beg them not to expose me and try to smooth things over.

Then, they showed up.

“Hey, there you are! So, we're good to go? Oh, and don't mind, we brought some of the girls too.”

There were six of them in total—three boys, three girls.

For a second, I hesitated. But after everything I had built up, there was no way I was going to let it all fall apart now.

With as much confidence as I could fake, I smirked. “Took you long enough.”

We headed to a small shop right across from the school. I told them to grab whatever they wanted—I'd take care of everything.



"Give me a moment, I'll be right back," I said. I bolted, sprinting home as fast as I could, and rushed straight to the kitchen. After making sure my mother was nowhere in sight, I reached for the Lakshmi Petti—a small metal container where most Indian families kept their savings. My hands trembled as I opened it. This wasn't just any money—it was my family's hard-earned savings.

I didn't think so. I just took what I needed and ran back to the shop.

"Where did you go?" one of them asked.

"Just went to get my wallet," I said.

Trying to keep my breathing steady, I handed the cash to the shopkeeper.

He looked at me, then at the group behind me. "Are you sure you're paying for everyone? Won't your parents say anything?"

Before I could answer, one of my classmates scoffed. "What? Nah, don't worry. They're loaded, right, man?"

My throat was dry, but I forced a grin.

"Of course," I said.

I bought everything they wanted, and after that, I went home. At dinner, my father asked my mother to get some money to buy a bag of rice.

She got up and walked into the kitchen.

I felt my heart pounding, a steady rhythm of panic drumming against my ribs. I tried to keep my breathing steady, forcing myself to act normal.

A few moments later, she returned and handed the money to my father.

I exhaled, realizing she must not have counted it—just taken what she needed.

For now, I was safe.

But I knew it was only a matter of time.

The truth always finds a way out.

While the panic still clung to me, I went to school the next day, trying to shake off the weight of my guilt.

"Hey, you're here! We were just talking about you," one of my classmates said with a grin.

I froze for a second. "Yeah? About what?"

"Your birthday is tomorrow, right?" they said.

My stomach dropped. I hadn't even realized it. The fear, the guilt—they had consumed me so much that I had lost track of time. That night, I barely slept. The feeling of having done something wrong haunted me, tightening its grip on my chest. I was terrified of what was coming next.

I tried to act normal. "Oh, yeah! I forgot. So what?" I said.

"Well, nothing much. We just thought you'd give us a treat!"

Treat!

The word alone made my heart sink.

I forced a smile. "Oh... uh, actually, I can't. I'm planning to visit my grandmother's house."

Before they could say anything else, I rushed off, not daring to look back.

When I got home, I found my mother rummaging through the kitchen, her expression tense.

"Oh, you're here," she said, turning to me. "Have you seen any money? It was in the Lakshmi Petti, but now I can't find it."

My heart pounded.

With the most innocent voice I could muster, I replied, "What money? I don't know."

The next day, I stayed home, pretending to be sick.

But a voice in my head kept whispering, "You can delay it, but you cannot escape it, can you?"

Back at school, I did my best to avoid everyone. I told them I was unwell or that my father had cut my allowance because I had spent too much money.

At some point, I just needed to get away from everything, so I wandered up to the third floor of the school, where most classrooms were empty. I sat down, trying to think of a way out of this mess.

Then, a loud voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Hey, why are you sitting here by yourself?"

I looked up. It was them.

I swallowed hard. "What? What do you want?"

"Huh? What else? Tomorrow is Sunday, and we'll be at your house. You'll buy us what we want, right?"

The way they spoke, the look in their eyes—I could tell this wasn't a request anymore.

Sunday arrived, and so did they.

My mother called out, "Your friends are here."

That same feeling hit me—a loud thump in my chest, cold sweat running down my neck, and a tight knot in my stomach.

I stepped out and told them to wait at the shop. Then, I rushed back inside to take money—no—to steal money from Lakshmi Petti.

Just as I was doing so, my mother's voice cut through the air.

"What are you doing?"

I froze.

It was over.

But even then, I clutched the money tightly in my palm and ran outside.

At the shop, I bought them everything they wanted, then hurried back home.

My mother was sitting on the divan, her gaze heavy as I walked toward her.

"Where have you been, and what were you doing?"

I stayed silent.

"Did you steal money from the house to buy something?"

"I gave a party to my friends," I muttered.

Her expression shifted to shock. "A party? Who did you ask? Where did you find the nerve to steal?"

She followed me to the store, her footsteps heavy with anger.

Once we arrived, she turned to the shopkeeper. "How much did he pay?"

The shopkeeper barely hesitated. "Around 250 rupees."

My mother's face stiffened. "Two hundred and fifty?"

"And not just today," he continued. "He buys them treats often. When I asked, he said he's wealthy."

I could feel my mother's gaze burning into me. Without another word, she grabbed my wrist and dragged me back home.

The moment we stepped inside, she struck me. "You will be the one to answer your father about the money you stole."

My stomach sank.

I begged her, pleaded with her not to tell him. But she wasn't listening. "Get inside," she ordered.

That night at dinner, I sat there, barely able to eat, preparing myself for what was coming.

Then, my father spoke. "Bring me the money," he told my mother.

She didn't move. Instead, she said, "I don't know. Ask your son."

My father's eyes narrowed. "What? What do you mean?"

I lowered my head, bracing for the worst. My hands trembled.

Then, I heard her voice again.

"He had some expenses. He needed a new geometry box and some stationery, so he used it."

The cold fear inside me melted away. I opened my teary eyes and looked at my mother. She didn't look at me, just continued eating as if nothing had happened.

Later, as I washed my hands, she spoke softly, "What you did was wrong, but I know you're smart enough to understand that... and to never do it again."

That night, for the first time in days, I slept peacefully.

But I had no idea what was waiting for me at school.

Their eyes were on me as I walked down the corridor.

Whispers floated around me, sharp as needles.

"So he got caught."

"What a liar."

I clenched my fists but kept walking, forcing myself to step into the classroom.

The moment I entered, the weight of their stares bore down on me. Then came the laughter—mocking, taunting.

"Hey, look! The rich kid's here!"

"Hey man, can you give us a treat?"

My heart pounded. My ears rang from their jeers, drowning out my own thoughts.

Then, the class teacher walked in.

"You," she said, looking at me, her voice cutting through the noise. "Meet me in the principal's office."

A lump formed in my throat as I made my way there.

Inside, two teachers stood waiting along with the principal, a woman in her 40s. She always showered appreciation towards me.

"I can't believe you're in trouble," the principal said, shaking her head. "You've always been such a good kid—so quiet, so well-behaved. What happened?"

The teachers recounted everything—the lies, the stolen money, the so-called "treats."

I watched as disbelief settled on the principal's face. She, like everyone else in my school life, had always known me as the quiet kid—the one who never spoke out of turn, who was well-mannered and shy. But that day, that image shattered.

She folded her hands on the desk and looked at me. "Is there anything you'd like to say about this?"

I stood there, silent.

She waited. When I didn't respond, she sighed and began lecturing me. For ten minutes, she spoke about honesty, responsibility, and trust. I barely heard any of it. My mind had already shut down.

In the end, she let me go.

From that day on, I stopped talking to everyone. And, fair enough, no one tried to talk to me either.

I became invisible. Isolated from the rest of the room.

I wasn't completely alone, though. There was a friend—V. He had always been a lot like me—quiet, not much of a talker, and barely doing his homework. We got along well. Even after he found out about my stealing and pretending to be rich, he just laughed and called me 'funny.' It felt like I could confide in him, and I did.

It was the end of summer break, and I was about to start sixth grade. As I walked into the school, I felt a mix of forced confidence and an underlying fear of the unknown. This year, the school had implemented a new system—separating students based on their academic performance. The 'clever' students were placed in Section A, while the 'dull' students were assigned to Section B.

At first, I didn't understand why this was necessary, but then it became clear. The system was designed to keep the weaker students from disrupting the smarter ones while allowing teachers to monitor and help them improve.

I walked in as my teacher was sorting students into their sections. When she called my name, she said, "You will be in Section B." Then, after a brief pause, she added, "You actually study well. I wonder why you haven't been doing so well lately."

I wasn't surprised—my grades had been low. But I knew that if I just focused, I could fix them. It was simple.

As I stepped into Section B, I felt a bit ashamed, but I kept moving and sat beside V.

That's when I noticed her—sitting across the room in Section A.

She had been in my class for as long as I could remember—over four years—but I had never really paid attention to her before. That changed that day.

Later, I was kneeling in the corridor as punishment for not doing my homework. It was nothing new; there hadn't been a single day where I hadn't ended up outside the classroom. The sun was beating down on my neck, sweat trickling down my back, when I suddenly heard footsteps approaching.

I turned to my left.

For a moment, my body froze as my eyes met hers.

She walked into the classroom, and for the first time, I realized how beautiful she was.

The next day, when I entered the classroom, I noticed something different—all the students from Section A and Section B were sitting together in the Section A classroom. I found a seat and sat down.

A few moments into the class, I heard a voice behind me.

“Hey.”

I didn't react at first, not realizing it was directed at me—until another student tapped my shoulder and pointed toward the back of the class.

I turned around.

It was Seren, looking angry.

“Stop stepping on my bag,” she said.

Confused, I looked down and saw that my foot was resting on her bag. Quickly, I moved it aside and apologized.

She muttered, “Are you stupid?”



I was happy—it was the first time she had talked to me. But at the same time, I felt ashamed for being so careless.

When the class ended, she approached me so silently it was as if she had appeared out of nowhere. I turned to my right and found her staring at me.

Her expression was a mix of frustration and annoyance, yet somehow, she still looked effortlessly beautiful. At that moment, I felt like I could stare at her forever.

"You didn't see my bag lying there? You didn't even feel that you were stepping on something?" she said, her tone sharp.

Flustered, I hurriedly picked up her bag, clumsily brushing off the dust. She took it from my hands with a sigh.

For the next week, we had combined classes, and all I did was steal glances at her while she focused on the lesson. There were little moments—her running her tongue over her lips, tucking her hair behind her ear—each one giving me a strange, dizzying rush.

I didn't realize V had noticed.

During lunch, he confronted me.

"I saw you staring at a girl from Section A," he said.

"A girl? Me? No way—" I tried to sound as confident as possible.

"Oh, I see," he smirked. "So, you're not going to admit you have a crush on that Seren girl?"

What?! How did he know? The grin on his face told me there was no point in denying it.

"Fine! Yes, I was staring at her. I think I like her."

"Well, well," he chuckled. "You could've just been honest. I would've helped you out."

"Help me? You really would?"

"Of course! I'm your friend, aren't I?"

Over the next few days, whenever we were in class, he would call her, saying something like, "Hey, we are behind our classes. Do you mind if we borrow your notes?"

He would then tell me to go to her and fetch them.

I used to go and bring the book, saying nothing.

"What are you doing?"

"What?"

"Don't just take the book and run off. Make some conversation. Tell her her handwriting is nice or something."

"What? No way. I- I can't say that."

I had always been nervous when it came to talking to girls.

After that day, I spent most of my time talking to V about her. One afternoon, he introduced me to a game.

"If you're serious about marrying her, you need to find out if you're compatible," he said.

"Compatible? How?"

"Simple—you have to do FLAMES."

"FLAMES?"

"That's right," he said with a smirk. "It's a game where F stands for Friends, L for Lovers, A for Affection, M for Marriage, E for Enemies, and S for Siblings."

He explained the rules: "We take your name and hers, cross out the common letters, and count how many are left. Then, we write 'FLAMES' on a piece of paper and count through the letters. If the final number lands on 4, you'll get married. But if it's 6, you'll be siblings. And remember—FLAMES has a 100% success rate."

"A 100% success rate? What do you mean?"

"I'm serious," he said with complete confidence.

A part of me knew it was just a stupid game, but another part of me was terrified. What if we ended up as siblings? Or, even worse, enemies?

"Alright, let's do this," I said, my voice a mix of curiosity and dread.

We wrote down our names, crossed out the matching letters, and ended up with the number 11. My heart pounded as V started counting.

"One, two, three..."

I held my breath.

And then—my worst fear came true.

ENEMIES.

I stared at the paper in disbelief. I felt crushed, convinced that fate had just doomed us to be rivals for life. And honestly, with the way she always looked at me—like I was some kind of annoying pest—it wasn't hard to believe.

But deep down, I refused to accept it.

Ever since that day, my confidence had plummeted.

That was when someone entered my life and changed everything.

His name was Say. He was the kind of guy who was always bursting with energy, cracking double-meaning jokes that made the girls laugh. He had also

noticed—just like V—that I spent a lot of time staring at Seren. And one day, he decided to call me out on it.

"Hey, do you have a crush on Seren?"

I froze, but I tried to play it cool. "No! What are you even talking about?"

Say smirked. "Oh, nothing. I was just wondering because, well...I actually like her."

My heart skipped a beat. I stared at him, searching his face, trying to figure out if he was serious.

Then, with a wide grin, he said, "Since you don't like her, I think I'll ask her to be my girlfriend."

That did it. There was no way I was going to sit still and let that happen.

"No, you can't," I blurted out. "Because...I like her."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I panicked. What if he told everyone? What had I just done?

Say chuckled. "Oh, I see. So you do love her." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "Don't worry, I just wanted you to admit it. I won't tell anyone."

I stared at him, still unsure. Who was this guy? What was he playing at? Could I really trust him with my secret?

A flood of questions raced through my mind, but I didn't get a chance to process them. The next day at school, I went to find V—I needed to tell him everything.

But something was off.

V wasn't there.

That was weird—he always got to class early. Just as I was wondering what was going on, a boy from my class walked up to me.

"I bet you'll miss your buddy, huh?"

"Miss? What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"You didn't hear? V's parents had to move out of town. He transferred to another school."

The news hit me like a punch to the gut.

V was gone? Just like that?

I felt a wave of loneliness wash over me. After school, I thought about going to his house to see him, but before I could even decide, Say plopped down beside me.

He listened as I told him everything. When I was done, he nodded.

"I'll come with you to visit V."

"Sure," I said.

But then he grinned. "Before that, why don't you make a move on Seren?"

I blinked. "What? What do you mean, 'make a move'?"

"You barely talk to her, right? Hey, Seren!"

Before I could even react, he shouted her name.

The whole class turned to look at us—including Seren.

"He wants to talk to you," Say said, pointing straight at me.

I froze. My heart pounded as her sharp gaze locked onto me. The room fell silent. I panicked, scrambling for something—anything—to say.

"Uh... c-can I borrow your notes?" I finally managed.

She just looked at me for a second, then turned away without a word.

A few of the guys in the class snickered. They knew something was up.

I turned to Say, furious. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" He looked at me, feigning innocence. "I'm helping you!"

"Helping? No, that's not helping. Don't ever do that again."

"C'mon, just staring at her all day isn't gonna do anything," he said.

His words hit me. He wasn't wrong. But—what was I supposed to do? I couldn't just walk up and talk to her. Even if I did, what would I even say?

A whirlpool of thoughts spun in my head.

Then Say said something that completely threw me off.

"You should imagine talking to her in your head. Like, practice a conversation."

"Practice?" I frowned. "Practice what?"

"Like, imagine you're with her. Talking, flirting... maybe even kissing without clothes on."

I stared at him, completely baffled. "What?! What the hell are you even talking about?"

Say just laughed. I shook my head, deciding to ignore him.

Later that day, we went to visit V. But by the time we got there, it was too late.

His house was empty. A "For Rent" sign hung on the gate.

I stood there for a long moment, staring at the vacant home. Regret weighed on me. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

That night, as I lay in bed, Say's words replayed in my head.

Imagine a scenario.

How was I even supposed to do that?

# Petal-borne

With V gone, school felt empty. I couldn't focus on anything. To make matters worse, Say wouldn't stop talking nonsense about "imagining" and other ridiculous things.

Home was the only place I felt like myself.

Back there, I had a friend, SNE. He was funny, and we spent hours playing video games. His parents worked long hours, so we often had the house to ourselves.

One day, I went over to his place, and we played Plants vs. Zombies for a while. After a few rounds, he suddenly said, "Hey, I want to show you a movie."

I didn't think much of it until I saw what was on the screen.

It was soft-core porn.

I was completely caught off guard. It was awkward. That was the first time I'd ever seen porn.

After that weird experience, we headed outside to play cricket, a sport I was actually quite good at.

While playing, we ran into two other friends, "The Duo." They were siblings who constantly argued and insulted each other. Watching them bicker was hilarious.

My days at home with my friends were some of the best. When January came, we'd spend hours flying kites, playing sports, and just messing around. But things changed. Eventually, Sne moved away.



Soon after, we met San. He was energetic, always running around and getting into something. Before long, it was me, San, and The Duo hanging out all the time. But unlike me, San and The Duo went to the same school, which made them closer.

I felt left out.

Every time we got together, their conversations were filled with inside jokes and school stories I didn't understand. I wanted to be part of it, but I always felt like an outsider.

Then, I met Ray.

Ray and I lived two houses apart, so we became close. He was tall, but somewhat childish. His father lived away, and his mother had mental health issues, so he was raised by his grandparents.

Perhaps because of that, I took advantage of him.

I bossed him around, scolded him whenever I felt like it, and sometimes even bullied him. He never fought back. He'd just look sad, but eventually, we'd hang out again as if nothing had happened.

Summer break started. A lot of kids from the neighborhood, including me, Ray, The Duo, and San, played hide-and-seek—a game I had played countless times growing up.

During the game, I started picking on Ray again. When he wasn't playing properly, I hit him on the head—harder than I meant to.

Ray burst into tears.

Everyone stopped and ran over.

The older one of The Duo turned to me, angry. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just hit him normally."

"Normally? He's crying! Who said you could hit people whenever you want?"

I knew I had messed up. But I wasn't going to admit it.

"I'll hit whoever I want. Ray doesn't have a problem with it."

Before I could say anything else, Ray wiped his tears and said, "I do have a problem. Stop hitting me. Why would you do that?"

I froze.

For the first time, I saw the look in his eyes.

I had gone too far.

Without a word, I turned and walked away.

For the next few days, I stayed home.

One evening, my mom asked me to buy groceries.

Walking down the street, I saw everyone hanging out. For a moment, I felt relieved. Maybe things will go back to normal.

I walked up to them and said, "Hey, when did you guys start playing? I had exams, so I couldn't come."

Silence.

They glanced at me, then looked away, acting like I wasn't there.

I stood there for a few seconds, waiting for someone to speak.

No one did.

That feeling wasn't new.

The sinking sensation, the feeling of being left out, of being invisible... I had felt it before.

At school.

After the "rich kid" incident.

So, I turned around and walked home.

After that, I spent most of my time alone. My mother noticed and asked why.

"You usually toss your bag aside and run off to play. But these days, you just stay home. Is something wrong?"

I shrugged. "No, it's nothing. Everyone's busy studying."

At school, Say greeted me.

"Hey, you're late too."

Our school had a morning prayer at 8:45 AM. The gate locked at 8:40, and anyone late had to wait outside until the prayer was over.

I was always late and never finished my homework.

"Hey, Say, did you finish all the homework?"

"Yeah, I did. What about you? Let me guess—you didn't."

I smirked. "Not hard to figure out."

Walking to class, he suddenly asked, "So, what did you do about what I told you?"

"What did you tell me? What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You know, about imagining her."

I froze before blurting out, "There's nothing to imagine. I don't even know what you're talking about."

Say just smirked. "Alright then, sit with me in the back of the class."

I sat with Say in the back. As the lesson went on, he leaned in and whispered, "Imagine she's sitting next to you, talking to you."

Confused, I went along with it.

I closed my eyes and pictured it—talking to her, laughing with her, even kissing her. Then, I imagined marrying her.

A rush of excitement filled me. The feelings were new and overwhelming, but they made me happy.

Caught up in the moment, I turned to Say and said, "I think I want to marry Seren someday."

He smirked. "That's all you imagined?"

"Yeah, that's all," I replied.

"You should try imagining her naked."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I stammered.

He just smirked.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Say's words stuck in my head.

It felt like a part of my innocence had been ripped away.

This imagination continued for a while. Say and I talked about it often. He even told me he imagined another girl in our class.

Since then, I couldn't stop imagining women. Whenever class was boring, I'd drift into my own world, creating scenarios in my head.

I thought this secret was safe with me. But I was wrong.

One day, I walked into class and saw a group of boys huddled together, talking. Say was with them. I took my seat, pretending not to notice.

Throughout the lesson, they kept looking at me, giggling, calling my name, and then saying nothing. At first, I ignored them, but then one of the boys smirked and said, "So, you like her, huh?"

I froze. His grin unsettled me.

Had Say told them something? Did he tell them I imagined kissing Seren, marrying her? My mind spiraled, and I felt sick.

At 2 PM, during recess, I splashed water on my face and leaned against the railing, trying to make sense of what was happening.

Then, a group of girls approached me. Seren was crying.

Fear gripped me. One of the girls stormed up to me, angry. "What did you say about Seren?"

"About who?" I asked, cold shivers running through me.

"The boys said you were talking about kissing and marrying Seren. About... inappropriate things."

Hearing those words—seeing Seren cry—made my stomach drop. I had messed up.

Even so, I stammered, "I don't know what you're talking about. Why would I say anything like that?"

The girl scoffed. "Our homeroom teacher is waiting for you in the class. Go talk to her."

Panic set in. My plan was to deny everything.

I walked to the classroom, my heart pounding.

"Excuse me, teacher... May I come in?" I asked hesitantly.

The room was empty except for the teacher. She stared at me as I approached. I could feel her anger.

I stood in front of her, swallowing my fear.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"The girls said you called for—"

Before I could finish, she slapped me.

"Get out," she snapped. "Bring your father to school tomorrow. I'll discuss this with him."

I sat at my desk, my mind racing.

Then, the girls walked back in and looked at me. I said nothing.

Seren's face was red from crying.

The last class of the day was about to begin. The classroom buzzed with rumors. Say sat in front of me, leaned back with a smirk, and laughed.

"Sorry, man, I didn't mean for it to happen," he said

.

The English teacher walked in. Known for her strictness, the class fell silent.

She walked up to me. "You, come outside."

I knew I was about to be disciplined again. I had given up.

But when the teacher asked, "Did you really say those things?"

"I—I didn't," I stammered.

I couldn't admit the truth.

She pressed on. "Then? Who was it?"

"It was Say," I said, my voice steady. "Say was the one who talked about her like that."

I added, "He said all those things and blamed me."

The teacher nodded. "I knew it. I knew you would never do such a thing. I've watched you since second grade—there's no way you'd act like that."

Hearing her words made me cry.

Even though I was lying.

Even though I was wrong.

She still believed I was innocent.

Her kindness broke me. I wept—not because I was free from blame, but because I was ashamed. I had let her down.

She consoled me and called my homeroom teacher, explaining everything. My homeroom teacher agreed.

“I was shocked too,” she said, “but now I see it was a mistake.”

They called Say outside and questioned him.

Even though he denied it, they didn’t believe him.

Then, they brought us back and asked the students if they knew anything.

The girls hesitated before saying, “Maybe it was Say... we can’t imagine that you would do such a thing.”

The class supported me. I was quiet, and no one believed I was capable of that.

No matter what Say said, they punished him—forcing him to apologize and warning him never to do it again.

The girls apologized to me for misunderstanding.

After that, I decided never to get involved with girls or their affairs. They seemed too complicated.

I thought I had escaped, that Say would take all the blame.

I was wrong.

Everyone treated me differently. Things weren’t the same.

It was the day of my 7th-grade results, and my school held a parent-teacher meeting.

I arrived with my parents, and stepping into the hall, I felt that familiar sinking feeling.

What if the teachers brought up what happened with Say and the girls?



I tried to push the thought away, but stepping into the classroom, I felt my father's sharp gaze. His eyes held something I couldn't place.

I had always been afraid of my father. He was good, but when angry, he was terrifying.

"Good morning," the teacher greeted.

"Good morning," my father replied.

I stood behind him.

"So, how is he doing in school?" my father asked.

"Well, he's doing alright," the teacher said. "But his grades have been low lately."

"Oh, I see," my father murmured.

He turned to me, his expression unreadable. "Do you have anything to say about your grades?"

My chest tightened. I felt like he'd lash out.

Thankfully, my teacher spoke up.

"Well, he usually does well. He hasn't been very active this year."

My father sighed. "He isn't really active at home either. He's always been like that."

My teacher assured him she would take care of my grades.

I felt like my father had calmed down.

But I still expected a scolding. He never hesitated to hit me, even in public.

That day, he had told me to study before playing. I said, "Sure," and left.

By 8 o'clock, I still hadn't opened my books. I was playing when I saw him walking toward me, angry.

I wanted to ask what was wrong, but before I could speak, he slapped me. Right there, in front of everyone.

I knew more was coming, so I ran.

He chased me, shouting insults. I ran as fast as I could, past everyone.

At the time, I didn't understand.

But later, I realized something. My father cared about me.

But he was also angry, someone who didn't always control his emotions.

Looking back, I know something else was bothering him that day.

But I never hated him.

I've seen his love, care, and sacrifices. I just wish he understood what he did wasn't right.

But I can't blame him either.

My mother told me about his past.

When he was young, he lost his father. His mother was paralyzed. At 17, he took care of her.

Then, after she died, he left for the city with almost nothing.

He was homeless. But he built himself up.

And for that, I will always respect him.

Back home, Ray and I were patching things up when Honey came along. She was Ray's cousin, a sweet girl.

One day, when I went to Ray's, Honey walked in.

Ray and I played Spirit—a game where you write A-Z and 1-10 on a sheet, place a coin on it, and try to talk to ghosts.

We played in a dark room. During the game, Ray freaked out at a noise under the bed, which made us panic. I felt pushed down.

I saw Honey on top of me.

After the game, I couldn't stop thinking about her.

The next day, I went to see Ray, and The Duo was there. The younger one greeted me.

"Hi, wanna play Truth or Dare?"

"Sure," I replied.

We sat in a circle. Honey crept up behind me, her fingers moving through my hair.

Ray said, "Honey, you have chores."

Honey pouted. "I'll play with him."

She pointed at me. I was starstruck.

Without hesitation, I said, "I won't play if she doesn't."

She sat beside me, her thighs brushing against mine.

We played, and the bottle landed on Honey.

"Truth or dare?" Ray asked.

“Truth,” Honey replied.

The older one of The Duo asked, “Do you have a crush on someone?”

I smiled. She looked at me and said, “I do.”

My heart nearly exploded. Ray smiled at me.

That evening, Ray pulled me aside. “Seems like you had fun,” he said.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I like Honey. I could see myself marrying her.”

Ray chuckled. “She talks about you at home.”

“She talks about me?” I asked. “What does she say?”

He shrugged. “She says you’re good at games. And cute.”

I sprinted home and wrote her a letter with lemon juice.

Stepping outside, I saw everyone. The oldest of The Duo asked, “What do you have there?”

“Nothing,” I said.

Ray smirked. “I told them.”

I ran, but they chased me. I ripped up the letter.

I was unusually energetic at school. I wanted to see Honey.

After school, I went to Ray’s. I saw someone new.

“This is my cousin, Spencer,” Ray said. “He’s a football player.”

Honey walked up to Spencer. “Let’s play chess,” she said.

They walked inside.

My heart sank.

Ray nudged me. “Wanna play cricket?”

I noticed Honey’s eyes.

They weren’t as bright as I remembered.

Ray pushed me to play. Spencer joined us.

“Wanna play football?” Spencer asked.

The Duo agreed.

Ray groaned. “You’re too good.”

Spencer smirked. “Four against one?”

Ray had told me how good Spencer was.

I wanted to beat him.

The match ended 10-2.

Spencer scored 10.

I was furious.

Ego and pride couldn’t beat hard work.

We played truth or dare again. Honey didn’t join.

She snapped at Ray, then grabbed my arm. “Let’s go to the terrace.”

Up on the terrace, she asked about my hobbies.

Then she asked, “Do you have a crush?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Who?” she asked.

“Do you?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I lied.”

“Honey—”

“It’s just tha—that I—”

“Hey, what are you both doing?” Spencer interrupted.

Honey turned to him. “I was about to call you.”

I walked away.

For two days, I stayed home.

When I went outside, Ray asked, “You okay? Wanna play cricket?”

We walked to the ground, where Spencer and The Duo were playing.

“I’m good at cricket too,” Spencer said.

I wanted to beat him.

We picked teams. Spencer and I were on the same team.

Spencer grinned. “We’ll win no matter what.”

I scoffed and switched teams.

The game began. Spencer was good. I was better.

His team scored 134. Then it was my turn.

I scored 148 runs.

“Wow,” Spencer said. “You’re really good.”

I scoffed.

After the game, Spencer said he was leaving tomorrow.

“This was the best send-off,” he said.

“I wish you could stay longer,” I said.

“Honey’s school starts soon,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

Ray said, "Spencer and Honey kissed."

I went home.

The next day, Spencer and Honey left.

I realized how unpredictable people can be.

At school, everyone saw me as innocent. But at home, I was different.

I swore and made inappropriate jokes. It felt good.

One day, The Duo said their parents told them not to hang out with me.

I didn't know what to say.

I started seeing it in their parents' faces.

At a birthday party, I was the only one without a gift.

I felt out of place.

The birthday boy's mother didn't want me there.

The next day, I went to The Duo's house. Their mother said they were playing Monopoly.

I went home.

I thought back to a time when I swore at the younger one of The Duo.

Their father heard me and threatened to talk to my father.

I didn't understand why. My classmates swore and laughed.

I realized the difference.

My classmates came from a no-filter background.

But where I lived, things were different. It was a neighborhood of educated parents.

And in the end, I had proven them right.

# Wandering rose

As a kid, I watched a lot of cartoons like Shin-chan, Doraemon, Kiteretsu, Oggy and the Cockroaches, Super Robot Monkey Team, and many more, including live-action shows like Ryukendo and Rescue Force.

Whenever my father walked in while I was watching cartoons, he would scold me, saying, “Cartoons are for kids.” Even my mother would sometimes ask, “Are you still watching cartoons? Aren’t you too old for that?”

But cartoons were there for me when I didn’t have any friends. I loved watching them; my favorite shows gave me comfort. Whenever my parents told me I was too grown up for cartoons, I felt afraid. It was a strange feeling, like I was about to lose something important, something that had always been there for me.

Around that time, I discovered Beyblade, a show that changed my life. It takes place in a fictional world where people battle using spinning tops called beyblades. These beyblades have spirits called bit-beasts, and the story follows a boy who dreams of becoming the best bey-blader in the world. He joins a team called the Bladebreakers, led by Kai.

Kai was different. He was strong—very strong—but cold. He didn’t talk much and preferred to be alone. He always chased perfection.

I felt a deep connection to him. I wanted to be like him.



From that moment on, I decided I would become just like Kai. In school, I stopped talking to anyone. If someone approached me, I ignored them. In class, I sat at the back, making sure to avoid people. During recess, when everyone stood outside and talked, I walked away and stood alone by the stair railing. I even went out of my way to avoid interactions.

And it worked.

Within days, I became completely invisible. No one cared to talk to me. No one even looked at me. People thought I was weird, crazy.

At home, I still hung out with Ray, but that didn't last long; he moved away, and suddenly, I was completely alone. The loneliness was unbearable, but I forced myself through it. Every day, I ignored conversations and kept to myself.

But no matter how much I tried, some people just wouldn't leave me alone.

Max was one of them.

He was a transfer student, from a different state. He was a fat kid, both shy and outgoing at the same time. He was naturally sweet to people, which made everyone in my class like him. At first, I didn't care at all.

One day, while I was at my usual spot, isolating myself, Max walked up to me.

“What are you doing here by yourself?” he asked.

I ignored him for a few seconds, hoping he'd go away. But instead, he grabbed my shoulder and asked, "What's wrong?"

I just wanted to get rid of him.

"Nothing," I said. "I'm just standing here."

"Oh, okay. I'll stand here too," he said.

And he did.

He started nagging me, asking why I didn't talk to people, why I stood there alone all the time.

I wanted to piss him off so he'd leave, so I said, "I'm an egoist. I hate people. I think they're beneath me, and I'm smarter than everyone."

I expected him to laugh in my face and walk away, thinking I was a lunatic.

But instead, the fool was curious.

"What's ego?" he asked.

I stared at him, wondering if he was serious.

Max was from a different state, and there was a language barrier. He wasn't fluent in English and mostly spoke Hindi. Even his Telugu had a few quirks. But I was fluent in all three.

So, I explained it to him.

"Wow," he said, smiling. "Why do you have it, man? Seems like a bad thing to have."

There was something about his innocence—the way he looked at me—that made me smile.

From that day on, Max kept coming back to talk to me. And before I even realized it, I started talking back.

His family owned a small general store, and I found myself hanging out there with him all the time.

Summer had finally arrived. After the break, I'd be in 9th grade, and in just two years, I'd be graduating. I'd always been eager to grow up—I just wanted my own bike, to go on night-outs, to have fun and do whatever I wanted. I couldn't wait to get older.

Things at home felt different. No one really hung out with me anymore, except The Duo. These days, it was just us—playing cards or cricket by ourselves. I still remembered when it was Ray, San, and so many other kids from the neighborhood, always out playing together. Those were good times.

But there were still a few kids who hung out with us.

We did all sorts of things, like “the wax experiment.” It was this fun little experiment we came up with. You'd take a Coca-Cola bottle cap, three rocks, and two candles. First, you'd arrange the rocks in a triangular shape with a candle in the middle. Then, you'd light the candle and place the bottle cap on top, as if you were cooking something.

Next, you'd drop small pieces of broken wax into the cap and wait. After about five minutes, you'd hear a little sizzle. That's when you should stand at a safe distance, pour just a little bit of water on it—and boom! A four-to-five-foot flame would shoot up like a mini volcano. It was insane and so much fun.

The Duo and I had a little ritual. We called it dillin-tikiri—even in our language, it sounded strange. We had no idea how we came up with it. Basically, we'd ride our bikes, cut a medium-sized tree branch, attach it to the back of one of our bikes, and parade it through the streets while dancing along. It was ridiculous, but we loved it.

Back in school—first day of 9th grade. Just two more years, and then I'll finally get to have some real fun, I told myself as I made my way to class.

The classroom was already buzzing with whispers and conversations. In the midst of it all, as soon as I put my bag down at the last desk, I noticed someone—a new student. I only caught a quick glance before the teacher walked in.

“All right, settle down,” she said.

The boys in front of me started talking.

“Hey, you see the new girl?” one of them whispered.

“Oh, that girl? I'd recommend staying away. A lot of guys already have their eyes on her, including Shi.”

Shi, huh? I had heard about him. He transferred last year and quickly became popular. There were rumors that at his old school, he grabbed the principal by the collar during a dispute. Ever since, no one in class really talked back to him. They looked at him like he was stronger, better—like he was someone to admire.

I hated that. I hated how people looked up to others, how they idolized someone as if they were above them. Whenever someone raved about a famous person,

calling them cool or special, it annoyed me. How could anyone put another person above themselves?

I didn't think much about the girl or Shi and just sat by myself.

"Did you all complete the summer assignment I gave you?" the teacher asked.

Sigh. Of course, I hadn't done it. It was summer—why would I waste it studying?

The teacher's eyes landed on me. I could read her lips.

"Did you do your homework?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Go stand outside," she said.

Great. First day of school, and I'm already being punished.

I glanced around. No one else was standing. Wait... am I the only one who didn't finish the assignment?

As I looked around, that's when I truly saw her. She wore white glasses, her hair neatly styled, her face calm and composed. But what captivated me most were her eyes—so bright, so clear, glowing like a full moon on the darkest night.

I stepped outside and stood there, unable to look away as she listened intently to the class.

During recess, I overheard her name—Masha. She was a sweet girl, quiet and reserved, never speaking to any boys—a trait I admired. She was also incredibly smart, excelling in her studies. I sat in class, helplessly staring at her.

"Can you stop looking at her? Everyone's going to notice," a voice cut through my daze.

Startled, I turned to see a boy I hadn't met before. He had the look of a newcomer, just like me.

"Hey, I'm Ash. What about you?" he introduced himself.

I wanted to ignore him, but before I could, Max walked up with a teasing grin.

"Hey, you made a new friend! Wait a second... Are you two siblings?"

Siblings? What?

"Nothing, I'm just surprised at how similar you both look," Max added.

I glanced at Ash properly for the first time. He wore glasses like mine, was thin like me... now that I thought about it, we did resemble each other.

He smiled, and we started talking. Turns out, he and Masha had been in the same school before transferring here together.

"So, are you two... together?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

He shook his head. "No, we're not."

For the next few days, I tried not to think much about her. I had promised myself not to get involved with any girls after the incident, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't help it. Every time I looked at her, I froze for a moment. My eyes were naturally drawn to her, even as doubt crept in—would she ever even notice me?

I wasn't particularly good-looking. At best, I was average. Sure, I could feed my pride and ego by calling myself godly beautiful, but even I knew that would be a lie. I didn't have any special skills or standout traits. I was just a normal, quiet kid who barely spoke.

And yet... every morning when I arrived at school, I felt something different—an unfamiliar excitement, a strange warmth in my chest.

Before, just the thought of walking to school filled me with anxiety, even fear. But now... was it eagerness?

For some reason, this time around, the other students started approaching me, talking to me, even though I tried to ignore them as much as possible. I had always preferred to keep to myself, sticking only with Max.

Ash, on the other hand, was a social butterfly. He could strike up effortless conversations with girls, laughing and joking as if it came naturally. I couldn't help but wonder—how do some people do that?

As the days passed, I found myself spending more and more time just looking at Masha. I kept telling myself it would end badly, constantly reminding myself of the thousand ways it wouldn't work out. And yet, I couldn't help it—I just kept staring at her.

Every time I got punished—kneeling down or standing outside the class for not finishing my homework—I felt embarrassed. Before, I never cared. I had been punished in front of my class countless times, and it never bothered me. But this was different.

Somehow, for the first time in five or six years, I actually started doing my homework. I finished my assignments. Not because I suddenly cared about school—but because I didn't want her to see me as a loser.

But why? It's not like I liked her...

And yet, every day in class, this became my routine.

"Hey, go talk to her," I heard a voice from the front of the class.

I glanced up. Shi was sitting there, and another student was trying to push him into talking to Masha. I had no interest in whatever was going on, so I ignored it.

The next day, when I walked into the classroom, I saw Shi sitting at my desk. Confused, I wondered why. There were two other boys with him, and I noticed his eyes were locked on Masha. I just wanted to sit in my usual spot, so I walked up to him.

"Can you get off? That's my desk," I said.

Shi barely spared me a glance. "Isn't that a desk? Sit there." He pointed toward the desk in front of him.



I insisted on sitting in my own seat, but the two boys with him stood up, their tone carrying a clear threat.

"Just sit there."

That's when Max walked in.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked.

I told him that they were sitting at my desk and refusing to move.

Max simply looked at them and said, "Move."

They smiled, shrugged, and left.

Max had always been liked by everyone. He was what I'd call chubby and innocent when he spoke—people naturally listened to him.

After they left, I just continued with my day. But later, during recess, something unexpected happened.

Shi had noticed me looking at Masha.

He walked up to me and said "Hey, I want you to switch seats with me."

I frowned. "What? No. I prefer to sit where I usually sit."

"Why?" he asked.

"What do you mean, why? I just like sitting in the back—"

"Is it for Masha?" he cut me off.

My chest tightened for a second, but I forced myself to stay calm.

"What? That's ridiculous," I said, keeping my voice confident, like I didn't care.

Shi grinned, like he knew something I didn't, then walked away.

From that day on, I tried to avoid looking at her. But sometimes, I just couldn't help it.

There were moments when our eyes met, and I could feel my heart pounding out of my chest, a warmth settling in my stomach.

And in one of those moments, I finally admitted it to myself.

I had feelings for her.

Everything about Masha excited me—like I was a kid experiencing something new for the first time. Sometimes, I would walk beside her in the hallway, and the way she looked at me made me want to drop dead on the spot.

But now, I have a problem.

Shi.

I couldn't make the same mistake again. I have to be careful. But I also needed someone to confide in—someone who could help me.

Max? No. He is too social. Telling him anything was like telling the whole school.

Ash?

Yeah. He went to the same school as her. He had to know something about her.

The next day, I approached Ash and asked him to sit with me.

I told him I liked Masha and needed his help. Most importantly, this had to stay a secret.

He shook his head with a soft smile.

He told me quite a bit about her—that she had always been good at academics, that she lived close to his house, and that she was quiet, rarely talking to anyone.

As he described her, I felt like he was talking about me.

We were so similar.

My attraction to her grew stronger every time I looked at her.

Then, one day, during a computer lab session, something happened that I would never forget.

After class, everyone had already left for the lab, but I was running late. As I walked down the hallway, Masha suddenly appeared out of nowhere, sprinting straight toward me.

She stopped as soon as she saw me, a big smile spreading across her face.

I couldn't help but stare.

Just like that, caught in the moment.

But as the stare grew more intense, I quickly looked away.

Then, her friend ran out of the classroom behind her.

"Why are you trying to cheat? We run to the bus when I say 'go!'" she called out.

Masha just laughed, and they both ran past me.

I stood there, a smile creeping onto my face, my cheeks turning beet red.

For a split second, I had thought she was running to hug me.

We had been so close.

"Are you just gonna stare, or are you actually going to do something?" Ash teased.

I shrugged. "I don't know... maybe I could talk to her, but she's always so quiet. She doesn't really talk to anyone."

"Maybe you should take her number," Ash suggested.

He was right. If I had her number, maybe I could start a conversation. But how was I supposed to get it?

Then, an idea struck me.

The attendance register that the teacher carried had all the students' details—including their phone numbers. After taking attendance every day, the teacher had to hand it over to the administration.

One evening, as soon as the teacher finished calling out names, I walked up to her.

"Ma'am, I can take the register to the office for you," I offered.

She smiled. "That's sweet, but I'll be fine."

I insisted, keeping my tone casual. "It's no problem, ma'am. I was already heading there for a fee-related issue anyway."

"Very well, sure," she agreed, handing it to me.

Just as I turned around, Shi appeared.

"Why don't I take it instead?" he said.

I frowned. Why? He never offered to do this before. Was he trying something?

"It's fine," I replied, gripping the register. "I can take care of it."

But he kept insisting.

"Alright, maybe I'll just take it myself," the teacher said, sensing the tension.

I quickly stepped in. "It's okay, ma'am. We'll take it together."

She nodded, and Shi and I walked down the hall.

Halfway there, he turned to me.

"Hey, why don't you hand me the register for a moment?"

"What? Why?"

Before I could react, he snatched it out of my hands and flipped through the pages.

I was tense. Was he trying to get her number too?

But instead, he stopped at his own details, checking how many absences he had.

I let out a quiet breath of relief.

After a while, he lost interest and handed it back to me. "You go ahead. I'm heading back to class."

As soon as he left, I quickly flipped through the register, found Masha's details, and memorized her number.

I repeated it in my head over and over again until I got back to class and scribbled it onto a piece of paper.

A few days later, I overheard some of the boys talking.

Shi was casually bragging. "Yeah, I have Masha's number. I texted her, but she won't reply. It's her family's phone."

I felt a mix of emotions—relief that she hadn't replied to him, but also frustration. What if she never replied to me either?

It was the day of our field trip to Wonderla, an amusement park.

On the bus ride, all the boys sat in the middle, screaming, singing songs, and making noise. I, on the other hand, sat in a corner at the back.

I didn't mind.

Whenever I sat in the last row of a bus, I felt good. Like I was on an adventure.

I had always liked that feeling.

As we made our way inside the park, a wave of anxiety struck me. I was afraid.

I had always been scared of heights—so much so that I never even used the second staircase at school. Our school had two staircases. The first one, enclosed

and leading to the first floor, was fine. But the second? It was open, leading up to the second floor, and just standing near it made me tense.

For someone like me, this amusement park was a nightmare.

It was filled with my worst fears.

As soon as I entered, my eyes landed on a giant roller coaster. Just being near it made my stomach twist.

Inside the park, there was also a 3D movie theater playing some cartoons about monkeys. I took a seat, put on my 3D glasses—only to realize I couldn't see clearly through them.

Then, suddenly, I felt my chair move.

The seats were special—they vibrated and moved up and down depending on the scenes in the movie. The second I felt it shift beneath me, I panicked. I couldn't sit still.

The entire theater was dark, filled with special effects. At one point, smoke filled the whole room, making it hard to see. That was it for me. I stood up and left after just a few minutes.

I decided to go to the swimming pool instead.

I had never learned how to swim, but everyone seemed to be having fun, so I dared myself to try.

At first, I only wanted to stand on the side, holding onto the safety railing. But once I got into the water, it felt... good. I couldn't swim, but gently floating around was fun.

For the first time that day, I actually enjoyed myself.

Then, Ash approached me.

"Hey, come on this ride with me," he said.

I hesitated. "Which one?"

"It's just a water slide. Come on."

I agreed without thinking.

What I failed to realize was that the ride he was talking about was on the fifth floor.

It was one of the biggest water slides in the park.

As soon as I saw it, I froze.

"What's wrong? Come on, it's pretty crowded up there," Ash said.

Crowded?



I wouldn't have come even if it was empty, and now I had to go while people were pushing each other up there?

I glanced up. The line was packed with people shoving their way forward.

But I had already said yes.

I took a deep breath. "Alright... let's go."

I wanted to do it. I really did. I mustered up all the courage I had and took a step forward.

But with every step closer, my confidence drained.

By the time I reached the final floor, I felt like my legs would give out.

Then Ash nudged me.

"Hey, look—it's Masha," he whispered.

"What? Where?"

I glanced down and saw her standing at the end of the slide with her friends.

My heart raced.

I wanted to go on the slide. I wanted to do it.

But as soon as it was my turn—

No way.

I stepped back.

Then, without another word, I turned and left.

Unlike me, Masha was having a lot of fun.

Everywhere I went, she was there. And every time we crossed paths, our eyes met.

It really was a memorable day.

After I found out that Masha lived near Ash's house, I started walking him home every day after school, hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

In class, I sat at the last desk, watching her.

I wondered—why is she so beautiful?

I could give all of myself to her.

My obsession with her felt like a mountain—unshakable, overwhelming.

I had a feature phone, a basic keypad phone with WhatsApp and everything. One day, Max was talking about the pictures he took at Wonderla. I leaned over as he showed them to Ash, and among them, I saw a picture of Masha.

A perfect picture.

I asked Max to send me all the photos—figuring he'd get suspicious if I asked for just hers.

Later, he sent them all, and there it was—the picture of Masha. Words couldn't express the beauty she held in her eyes.

Someone like me—someone who lived selfishly, with ego and arrogance—I wondered, would I ever be worthy of her? Would I ever be able to not let her down?

Every night before I slept, I would open her picture, press a gentle kiss to the screen, and whisper, Goodnight.

And every morning, Good morning.

Sometimes, I just stare at her picture for minutes, getting lost in it.

I loved that feeling.

I wanted it to last forever.

But fate had other plans for me.

Back in school, I noticed that Ash and Shi hung out somewhat often. It was only later that I found out why—Shi also lived close to Masha and Ash. In fact, their houses were just a few doors apart.

Hearing that made me uneasy.

Shi claimed he loved Masha, but he barely made any moves. Occasionally, I'd see him ask her for something, and she'd give it to him without thinking much of it.

Well, he was already doing better than me.

I was doing nothing.

Fear held me back.

The fear of rejection.

Where I was from, dating and love weren't simple things.

But even as my feelings consumed me, my exams were nearing.

Yet, I hadn't been studying.

Every day, I just went home, played games, and watched cartoons. I knew that if I put in the effort, I could score well. But I also knew that even without studying, I could still handle it.

Or so I thought.

When the results came out, I had scored the lowest marks in my entire class.

I barely passed math.

I stared at my results in shock. Sure, I hadn't studied, but I had always managed good grades before.

On the day of the parent-teacher meeting, after everything was over, my father spoke to me.

"For just one year, focus on your studies," he said. "After that, you can do whatever you want."

His words felt different.

Before, he would get mad if I even got a B+ or an A, telling me that if I just tried, I could get an A+.

But now...

Now, he didn't even seem mad.

The way he looked at me when he said those words—it wasn't anger.

It was something else.

He just wants me to fix my own life.

Summer break arrived, and my father wanted me to get a job. He didn't want me sitting around at home, so I did.

I got a job at a clothing store, working alongside Max.

Max, of course, couldn't resist stealing trousers from there.

At home, it was just me and The Duo. We spent most of our time playing cricket and flying kites.

But when I wasn't with them, I was in my room—experimenting.

I had always been fascinated by science.

I loved learning new things.

I spent hours watching science experiments on YouTube and trying them out myself.

Maybe it was because of something that happened that day.

I was a slow kid.

Not in intelligence—I was good at studies—but in everything else. I was dull, lifeless, as if I had no soul.

That day, our school held a science fair. Every student had to create a science project to showcase for the parents.

In our class, there were two boys—always at the top of the social hierarchy.

They were like stars, the ones everyone admired. Every discussion, every event—they were always at the center of it.

I hated them.

I hated how they always stood above the rest.

Because I was quiet and dull, the teacher assigned them to make my project for me.

I was supposed to showcase it as if it were mine.

I wanted to speak up. I wanted to tell the teacher that I could do it myself.

But I didn't.

I stayed silent.

When the science fair arrived, all the parents came to visit, including mine.

It was my first-ever project, and my father was eager to see what I had made.

As he entered the classroom, his eyes searched for me.

And when he found me, he walked up with a proud smile.

My project was a model zoo—a dome-shaped cardboard display with tiny animal figures inside.

He looked at me and, in broken English, asked, "Can explain what?"

My father couldn't speak English at all, but it was a joy to see him try.

So, in the most fluent English I could manage, I explained my project to him.

He nodded, eyes shining with joy, and took a picture.

Then he left.

But as I watched him walk away, something inside me twisted.

Because I knew the truth.

I hadn't made that project.

That evening, at home, he proudly showed the picture to my mother.

He talked about how good my project was. How it was the best in the whole class.

I just forced a small smile and walked off.

That night, I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling.

And I made a decision.

From that day on, I spent countless hours on creativity.

I sat in my room, cutting cardboard, gluing pieces together—always trying to make something.

I wanted to see that look in his eyes again.

I wanted him to be proud of me, but it always ended up in me sticking glue on the walls of my house, which damaged the house.

One day, the older one of The Duo came to visit me on his motorcycle.

We decided to ride around town, just exploring aimlessly, when suddenly, he made an offer.

"Hey, do you wanna drive?"

I had never driven a motorcycle before. But I knew how it worked—the gears, the clutch, everything. So, without hesitation, I said, "Sure, why not?"

As I took the handlebars, I tried my best to fake confidence.

At first, it was a disaster. The bike kept swaying sideways, and I struggled to keep it steady.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" he asked, watching me closely.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just out of practice," I said.

After a few more attempts, I got the hang of it. And just like that, I was riding perfectly fine.

It was easy.

It was the same with cigarettes.

It was the end of my summer break when my mother called out to me.

"Someone's here to see you."

I stepped outside to find an unexpected guest—Son.

Son was a classmate of mine, but he never really hung out with me. He belonged to the cool kids.

"Hey, you wanna come outside?" he asked.

"Come outside for what?"



"Just to hang out. We'll go for a walk."

Still confused, I agreed. "Sure."

As we walked, he suddenly turned to me.

"So, do you smoke?"

I frowned. "Smoke? What?"

"You know... cigarettes."

The question caught me off guard. It felt so random.

Smoking? Why would I ever smoke?

But he was part of the cool kids. If I said no, would he think I was lame? If I said yes, would I have to prove it?

Before I could decide, he walked up to a small shop and bought a cigarette.

"Let's go behind the buses," he said.

There was an empty lot near our school where buses were usually parked. It was quiet, hidden. We walked over, and Son pulled out the cigarette, looking at me for a brief second before handing it to me.

"Do you wanna light it?" he asked.

I took the cigarette and placed it between my lips.

He struck a match, and I leaned in.

Then, I inhaled.

And immediately, I started coughing uncontrollably.

"Woah, what's wrong? I thought you said you smoke," he said, laughing.

"Yeah, I do... It's just that I smoke a different brand," I said quickly, trying to recover. "This one's a little rough."

He nodded, completely buying the lie. "Yeah, different brands do hit differently. Some of them are harsher on your throat."

As we continued smoking, he started telling me how he had been smoking since he was 13.

I lied again.

"Me too," I said. "I used to steal my dad's cigarettes and smoke in secret."

That day was my first time smoking.

As we finished and walked out from behind the buses, I felt a wave of dizziness wash over me. A cold sweat clung to my skin.

But I didn't say anything.

I just kept walking.

After that day, Son and I started hanging out more often.

As school resumed for our final year, something felt different.

Everyone talked to me normally, and for the first time, I found myself making a lot of conversations too.

I sat at my desk, my eyes instinctively searching for Masha.

And there she was—right across the room.

The teacher began talking about how important this year was for us, how we would soon complete our school life and move on.

Hearing her words, a thought struck me.

It was true.

We would move on.

And so would Masha.

Would she even remember me after this year?

Should I try to go to the same college as her?

The idea filled my head—I imagined us studying together, walking through the same campus. It would be nice... wouldn't it?

"And you—you had better study well this year," the teacher suddenly called out.

I was too distracted to realize she was talking to me.

I was still staring at Masha. Just then, she turned to look at me. Our eyes met.

"Are you listening?" the teacher repeated.

Ash, sitting beside me, nudged my shoulder. "Hey!"

Still lost in thought, I blurted out, "Present, ma'am," thinking she was taking attendance.

The entire class burst into laughter.

Around this time, The Duo and I started talking about setting up a Ganesha statue. In Hindu tradition, there was a festival—Vinayaka Chaturthi—the celebration of Vinayaka's birth, the elephant-headed god of wisdom and prosperity.

Even though I was Christian, I had never given much thought to religion or God. I just wanted to be part of the festivities.

The preparations began. The Duo and I recruited all the kids in the neighborhood to collect donations for the event while I started building the shed for the statue. In no time, we managed to gather about 8,000 rupees. I estimated the statue itself would cost around 5,000, but we still needed at least another 7,000 for all the other expenses.

The festival lasted for a set period. After bringing in the Ganesha statue, daily prayers were performed until the final ritual—the immersion. The submersion could take place on the 5th, 7th, 9th, or, most commonly, the 13th day.

As the event kicked off, we were busy rallying the neighbors, encouraging them to participate. It was one of the most stressful yet happiest times of my life.

But during this time, I did something I knew I shouldn't have—I stole from the donation money to buy snacks. It was said that stealing from Vinayaka's donations would bring bad luck, but that never stopped me.

As a child, I feared God. I used to pray often, asking for good grades or toys, but when my prayers weren't answered, I would get angry—sometimes even scolding God. Yet, moments later, guilt would creep in, and I would apologize, afraid of divine punishment. Even when I stole from the donations, that same guilt gnawed at me. But I did it anyway.

Back in school, academics took center stage. My father had arranged a tuition class for me, which I attended with a few classmates, including Max. The class was a bit far from home, and over time, we became close to our tutor, a young

man in his late twenties. He was skilled and, along with two of his friends, taught around 30 students.

Max and I grew particularly close to them, often staying over at their house. We had separate rooms, but sometimes, we would sleep on the roof, under the open sky. It was during these nights that I picked up a new habit—sneaking out past midnight to buy cigarettes.

The nearest store stayed open until 1 AM. I would slip out after midnight, make my way there, buy cigarettes, and return to the rooftop to smoke. Other students, mostly older than me by four or five years, often joined.

One night, as I lit my cigarette and took a drag, one of them smirked.

"So, you mouth it, huh?" he asked.

"Mouth?" I repeated, pretending to understand. "Yeah, I do."

"Mouthing is bad for you," he explained. "It'll make your throat hurt."

He then clarified—mouthing meant holding the smoke in my mouth before exhaling, rather than inhaling it into my lungs. That night, I realized I had been doing it wrong all along.

Over time, sneaking cigarettes became a habit. Sometimes, I would even bring one inside the house. At around 2 AM, while everyone was asleep, I'd sit by the open window, lettin the night air mix with the swirling smoke.

At school, I spent most of my time just staring at Masha. Her smile, her small gestures—they filled my days. I never seriously considered telling her how I felt. I just wanted time to freeze, for these moments to last forever. But no matter how strong my feelings were, they couldn't stop time from moving forward.

In the blink of an eye, the school year was coming to an end. The classroom buzzed with whispers and endless conversations. Worries, laughter, joy, confusion, sadness—it was all just a part of our youthful innocence.

I wanted to tell Masha how I felt, but at the same time, I was terrified of rejection. Deep down, I believed I had nothing to offer her—nothing but my soul. And in this unforgiving world, a soul alone wasn't enough to survive.

I knew I had to become better. So, I made a decision—I would try to get into the same college as her. I wanted to ensure that no one else got close to her. At the same time, I needed to do something meaningful with my life—something that would make me worthy... worthy of having her.

Back at home, my parents were anxious about my exams. These exams were a crucial step in my education, and the pressure on me was immense. Many of my father's friends had children my age, and comparisons were inevitable. I couldn't afford to fail.

The day of the exams arrived. My father dropped Max and me off at the exam venue. Unlike regular exams, students were shuffled and assigned to different schools, so we had to write our papers at an unfamiliar location.

As I stood outside the exam center, preparing to go in, my father wished me luck. But just as I turned away, I caught a glimpse of his face—his eyes held back tears.

Why?

Was he afraid I wouldn't pass? Or was he proud—watching me step into the real world, where I would have to carve my own path and walk it alone? Was he uncertain about what my future held?

These questions tore through my mind as I stepped into the exam hall. I had to give it my all. I had to.

Each day, I sat beside Max, scribbling down answers, subject after subject. Six exams, six long days. And then... the wait.

Days crawled by, stretching endlessly. Then, finally, the moment arrived.

I was sitting at home, watching cartoons, trying to ignore the knot in my stomach when my phone buzzed. A WhatsApp message.

I hesitated before opening it. My classmates were already talking about their scores. My fingers hovered over the screen, a strange numbness settling over me.

Just then, my father walked in, phone pressed to his ear. His voice was steady, but I could see something flickering in his eyes.

“Yes,” he said, glancing at me. “Can you check my son’s result too?”

My chest tightened. My mother and siblings stood nearby, silent, waiting. The seconds stretched, heavy and unbearable.

Then, my father’s voice broke the tension.

“7.7 out of 10.”

I had passed.

A smile spread across his face. “Congratulations,” he said warmly. My mother clapped her hands together in relief. My siblings cheered. The room filled with laughter and excitement.

But inside, I felt nothing.

7.7.

I used to be a top student. I used to be somebody. Perfect grades came easy to me. I had been the class representative for three years in a row.

Now, I was just... average.



Some of my father's friends had kids who scored 9.5. Others had 8.5. And I was sitting here, barely managing a 7.7.

I forced a smile, but shame was gnawing at my insides.

Maybe my father is disappointed too.

Maybe he's just relieved I didn't fail.

Did he expect this from me? Did he think I was this... ordinary?

The thoughts spun wildly in my head, trapping me in a storm of doubt.

And then—suddenly—warmth.

My father's arms wrapped around me in a hug. "You did well," he whispered. "I'm proud of you."

I wanted to believe him.

But the thoughts didn't stop.

I needed to get out.

I rushed to The Duo's house, desperate to know their results. Maybe they did better. Maybe I wasn't the only one feeling this way.

I knocked.

The door swung open.

His father stood there, eyes bloodshot, filled with an anger so raw, so intense, I felt it hit me like a slap.

Behind him, the eldest of The Duo sat on the couch, staring blankly at the floor. His shoulders slumped, his expression drained.

Before I could ask anything, his father's voice came crashing down like thunder.

"Why are you here, you stupid moron?"

I froze.

"You're the reason he got low grades! It's your fault!" His voice rose, shaking with fury. "You characterless, cheap bastard! If I ever see you near my son again, I'll kill you!"

The words struck like a dagger to the gut.

I didn't wait to respond.

I ran.

I sprinted as fast as my legs could carry me, feet pounding against the pavement, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps. My heart felt like it was about to burst from my chest.

I didn't understand.

Why did he blame me?

Why did he hate me?

But deep down, I already knew the answer.

Because he was right.

I was a characterless idiot.

People always seemed to hate me when I was around them. I was a bad influence. A walking disaster. I had always known it—I just never wanted to accept it.

My arrogance.

My overconfidence.

My ego.

It has led me here. It had made me a disappointment. There was no point in denying it anymore.

# Withering rose

My school hosted a farewell party to send us off. I initially didn't want to go because they said every student had to give a speech on stage. But in the end, I went anyway.

When I arrived, I saw my classmates walking through the school one last time, stepping into our old classrooms, taking it all in. Sadness was written all over their faces, but I felt something different—excitement. I knew that from that moment on, I was free to shape my own life.

Masha was there too, wearing a black and green dress. The farewell was filled with songs and speeches, and for the first time in a while, I found myself feeling closer to my classmates.

Later, Masha's older brother arrived to pick her up. I stood to the side, watching her leave, knowing that this would be the last time I'd see her in a school uniform—sitting in the front of the class, eating lunch with friends. My soul ached at the thought of her absence, but deep down, I believed that one day, we would be together again.

After school ended, summer felt lonely. I spent most of my time by myself. Then, in the middle of the break, we moved to a new home—a more isolated place. My parents had already started discussing my future, and my father wanted me to take the PolyCET exam, which would help me get a scholarship

for my diploma. I had also convinced Max to take the PolyCET exam, and as a result, we both ended up going to the same college.

On our first day, Max and I were excited, talking about how we would stand out in college. But we were running late. Sprinting to our classroom, we arrived to find that everyone had already settled in and made friends. We sat at the last desk.

During recess, Max introduced me to two new friends, Ali and Sha. We met at the cafeteria, and the four of us quickly became close. We spent most of our time together, laughing, exploring, and making memories.

But just a few days later, Max stopped showing up to college. Worried, I went to his house to ask him why. He told me that his father didn't want him to continue his studies because their financial situation wasn't good, and they couldn't afford to send him too far away.

My early days in college were welcoming. I got along well with my classmates and was determined to leave my shy nature behind, embracing this fresh start. I wanted to become a better version of myself.

Sha and I started skipping classes, wandering off instead. Just outside the college, there was a smoking zone where Ali and I began going. What started as an occasional habit soon became a daily routine—I found myself smoking almost every day.

In class, we also met Jack. He was notably short, and we often teased him about it, but he was the sharpest one among us. Over time, Sha and I became inseparable. Every morning, I would go to the bus station, and instead of heading

to college, we would disappear—sometimes smoking, other times exploring new places.

But reality caught up with me. Our college had a strict 75% mandatory attendance rule, and I barely had 16%. That meant trouble—not just for me, but for my scholarship too. If my attendance didn't improve, I would lose it.

The college called my father in for a meeting.

"My son leaves for college every day. What do you mean he has low attendance?" my father asked, confused.

I lied without hesitation. "I do come to college, but for some reason, my attendance isn't being recorded."

The teacher wasn't convinced. "I'm sorry, but he has very low attendance. The only way to fix this is to bring a medical certificate stating that he was sick and was unable to attend college and that's why he has low attendance. That's the only option now."

I stood there, regretting my choices, as my father listened in silence. He didn't say a word—just gave me a look filled with disappointment. That was worse than any scolding.

From that day on, I started attending college regularly.

It was only later that I found out Sha was dropping out.

Regardless, coming to college every day wasn't so bad. I spent most of my time with Ali, Jack, and a few other classmates. These days were some of the most fun I had—I was always talking to someone, always hanging out. But when it came to girls, I was different. I never really interacted with them. Ali and Jack constantly teased me, saying I was either "allergic to women" or just too scared to talk to them.

At this point in my life, I still have no clear idea of what I want to become. My first-semester results came in, and I failed two out of five subjects.

Originally, I wanted to pursue a course in Electronics and Computer Science since I have always been fascinated by computers and technology. But my father insisted I study Electrical Engineering because his friends assured him it would guarantee me a good job. Seeing my failed subjects, I tried to blame him. I told myself I failed because my father forced me into this field.

I always try to find an easy way out of problems I create, instead of taking responsibility for them. My father was deeply hurt when I blamed him, but I was too selfish to see it.

One day, one of my teachers sat me down and said, "Regardless of what happened, you chose to be in that class, and you took those exams. You failed because you didn't study. Forget about the past and focus on doing better now."

His words hit me hard. I agreed with him and decided to take my studies seriously. But deep down, I'm still lazy. Every time exams come around, I find myself playing video games instead of studying. I know I could do well if I put in the effort.

During my second year of college, I visited my grandparents, who lived in the countryside. It had been a while since my last cigarette, and the withdrawal was hitting me—I had headaches and mood swings. But the town where my grandparents lived was small. Everyone knew each other, including the shopkeepers. If I walked into a store to buy cigarettes, word would surely get back to my family.

So, I came up with a plan. My father used to smoke, so I went to the store pretending to buy cigarettes for him. Then, I would sneak off into the nearby woods to smoke in secret.

Just outside the town, there was a lake. I started going there to fish—it was my first time, but I found it easy to learn. That night, after coming home, I decided to text Masha.

I didn't want to come off as a creep, so I kept it simple and asked about her college. To my surprise, she replied almost instantly. It was my first time texting a girl, and my happiness soared beyond the sky. We chatted for about an hour.

The next day, I texted her again. This time, we talked even longer.

That night, I was on my way home. It was around 10 PM when I pulled out my phone, excited to text Masha as usual. I didn't want to say anything weird—I wanted to take things slowly.

But in the heat of the moment, I asked, "What do you think of me?"



She replied, "What do you mean?"

My heart pounded. My fingers trembled. And then, I finally said it: "I love you, Masha."

At that moment, every second felt like an eternity.

She responded, "No, I'm sorry, but I don't want anything like that."

I felt my chest tighten. But still, I tried again. "But I want to be your life partner. I think we would be happy together."

"I'm sorry, but it's not you—I just don't want anything like that with anyone."

My heart sank. I didn't want to push any further. So, I simply replied, "Thank you."

Ever since that day, I felt as if my heart was somewhere else. I would lie on my bed, staring at the ceiling, as silent tears soaked my pillow. I liked her—not just for her beauty, but for her innocence. The dreams I had woven in my mind, the future I had imagined with her, all collapsed in an instant.

When I sat in class, watching the girls talk and laugh with groups of boys, I felt uneasy. I always told myself I didn't care about women who engaged with different men, but deep down, something about it unsettled me.

Whenever I saw a girl who was beautiful and full of life, there was a spark of interest—but the moment she interacted with another guy, that spark faded. It was as if she were a withering leaf, losing its color right before my eyes.

"Did you know? We fought with this guy yesterday," Ali said to Jack.

I overheard and instantly grew curious. "What fight?" I asked.

"Some guy. We knocked him out," Ali said casually.

As I listened, a familiar feeling crept in—an unbearable sense of inferiority, like I was being crushed under the weight of something I couldn't name. I had felt this way before.

Back in fifth grade, when some students excitedly talked about the fancy cars their parents owned.

In school, when the boys cracked jokes that made the girls giggle.

And now, hearing Ali and Jack talk about their fight.

I hated this feeling—the feeling of speaking about someone else as if they were somehow more than me. It made my skin crawl. I refused to accept it.

During sports, I always sat on the sidelines, watching my classmates play cricket. They would invite me, but I always declined. It wasn't that I didn't know how to

play—I had played cricket throughout my childhood. But something about joining them felt... uncertain.

"What if I miss the ball?" "What if I don't play well?" These questions raced through my mind as I sat there, watching, always watching—but never playing.

It was a breezy day.

"Hey, do you want to drink beer?" Ali asked.

"Yeah, sure," I replied.

The three of us—Jack, Ali, and I—gathered all the money we had and wandered into the woods. Our college was located in a remote area, surrounded by trees and empty roads. With three beers in hand, we sat under a tree as Jack set up the peanuts as a side dish. Our faces glowed with excitement.

Ali handed me a bottle and began opening his. I hesitated; I had never drunk before. But I had lied to my classmates countless times, bragging about my drinking experiences, and they always believed me. Everyone did. I was a master at weaving a web of lies.

I glanced at Jack, who effortlessly popped the cap off with his teeth. It's not rocket science, I thought. I bit down on the edge of my bottle cap and pried it off with my lower teeth. The strong smell of beer hit me immediately. Foam bubbled up to the top.

Ali tossed a peanut into his bottle. "If you drop a peanut in, the foam stops," he said.

"Yeah, of course, I do that too," I replied, pretending it was second nature.

I took my first sip—bitter, chilled.

After three or four sips, something strange happened. My vision sharpened. Everything felt clearer, more vivid. We continued drinking, chatting, and laughing. A faint dizziness settled in, growing stronger when I stood up to light a cigarette.

Two hours later, I felt normal again. By the time I got home, I made sure to keep my conversation with my mother to a minimum. I just wanted to sleep.

In college, my classmates adored me. They always talked to me and looked to me before making decisions. I liked that feeling.

Jack and Ali lived close to each other, and whenever I arrived at college, I would often see them sitting together, deep in conversation. But the moment they noticed me, they would stop whatever they were talking about, and we'd start chatting as always.

My diploma years felt like a dream I could have lived in forever.

Ever since I was a kid, I loved watching Hollywood movies—films like Spider-Man and Harry Potter made up most of my childhood. Back then, I didn't

have the internet or a mobile phone, so I could only watch the movies I wanted if they happened to air on television. But now, with unlimited access online, I could watch whatever I wanted.

So, I started with Harry Potter, then moved on to Transformers. Every night at around 11 o'clock, I would lie in bed, pick a movie, and watch it. To keep track, I even wrote down the names of the movies in my notes and told myself I would rewatch them in 10 years with my lover wrapped around my arms.

One night, I stumbled upon a film that seemed ordinary at first—a mix of fiction and romance. But as the story progressed, it completely captivated me. After finishing the first part, I couldn't stop myself; I immediately watched part two. By the time I finished, it was 3 a.m., yet the urge to continue was too strong. So, I watched part three as well.

The next morning, I realized there were still two more parts left, and I decided I would finish them that night. What followed was an emotional roller coaster, and by the time the final credits rolled, I whispered to myself, "This has to be the best movie I've ever watched."

It was The Twilight Saga.

I loved everything about the movie—except Jacob. The story revolves around Bella and Edward, a vampire. As they navigate their love story, Jacob comes into the picture, trying to take Bella away. In the end, Edward wins her heart, but Jacob's presence always felt unnecessary to me.

After that, I made it a routine—watching a new movie every night until I had seen about 400 in total. Many of them left a lasting impression on me.

Then, I stumbled upon something new—anime.

Having spent so much time watching movies, I had almost forgotten about cartoons. I missed them. So, I decided to give anime a try. The first one I chose was High School DxD. While the fan service in the series was... questionable, that wasn't what caught my attention.

It was a character—Rias Gremory.

She was introduced in the first episode—a devil with crimson-red hair and piercing green eyes. The moment she spoke, my heart pounded with admiration. There was something about her voice, her way of speaking, that pulled me in. Soon, she became what most people would call my “waifu.”

After DxD, I watched many more anime—Horimiya, Death Note, and over 50 others. I found myself drawn to the romance and slice-of-life genres. Even though I had no love life of my own, those stories felt relatable in a strange way.

Then I came across Oregairu (My Teen Romantic Comedy SNAFU).

The story follows Hachiman Hikigaya, a high school student who is anti-social and views the world through a deeply pessimistic lens. His monologues, his interactions with others—I felt as if it was my own story unfolding on the screen.

One evening, I went out for a walk, earphones in, listening to Rias Gremory's theme song.

As I walked, I imagined her beside me—what if she were real? What if we had a conversation? The scenarios in my head felt so vivid, so real.

Then, something strange happened—a memory resurfaced.

This wasn't new to me. I had done this before, years ago—creating fake scenarios in my head, losing myself in an imaginary world.

Before I knew it, I had walked nearly two kilometers from my house without even realizing it. When I got home, I couldn't stop. The next day, I went out again, this time putting more thought into my made-up scenarios—making the characters more expressive, adding more details. I even searched for background images on Google, using them as inspiration to build my world.

Then, for the first time, I fully wove an entire story in my head.

It was based on The Akashic Records of Bastard Magic Instructor—a fantasy world filled with magic. In this story, I was the protagonist, and Rias Gremory was my love interest. The scenarios I created felt so heartwarming, almost like they were real.

Over the next few days, this became my new routine. After college, I would go to an abandoned park with a lake, where no one else was around, and spend hours lost in my imagination.

At night, instead of watching movies like I used to, I would continue my stories—creating new scenarios until past 2 a.m.

Every day, I would start over again, crafting a fresh story. But after about a week, something changed—I didn't feel the same excitement anymore. I realized it was because I kept creating the same story, over and over again.

So, I started exploring different ideas, trying to introduce new plots and settings. But no matter how much I changed, one character always remained the same—Rias Gremory.

I couldn't get her out of my mind.

Even after making dozens of stories featuring her, it never felt repetitive. Every conversation with her in my head felt as if it were happening for the first time.

After about a month, I thought, Maybe I should try replacing Rias with someone else.

So, I chose Yukino Yukinoshita from Oregairu.

But it wasn't the same.

Just a day later, I went back to dreaming about Rias.

No matter how many times I tried to replace her, every scenario without her felt incomplete—unsatisfying. That's when I came to the ultimate conclusion:



Rias Gremory was all my heart wanted.

No matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I yearned for something new, I couldn't erase her from my mind.

Every day, I would come to this empty park, bringing along two cigarettes.

I started smoking in my imaginations to make them feel more real. Eventually, I began smoking in reality too. At first, it was just two or three a day. Then it became five. Five turned into nine.

I remembered hearing about a guy in college who smoked an entire pack a day—ten cigarettes. At the time, it seemed impossible to me. But now, I found myself smoking nine daily.

At home, I insisted on having my own room. Every night, I would shut the door, lie down, and start imagining. To add more depth, I played music through my earphones, picturing myself singing the songs in my stories.

Even in college, surrounded by people, I couldn't help myself; I would drift into my own world.

And then, my grades started slipping.

By my fourth semester, I had failed four out of five subjects. Panic set in. I didn't know what to do. Every time I sat down to study, my mind would wander. I

wanted to stop—but the moment I tried to focus, within seconds, I would slip back into creating scenarios.

And then, it got worse.

I started talking to myself.

At first, it was just a whisper—a low murmur of dialogues from my stories. But soon, I found myself speaking aloud, reenacting conversations in my head.

Outside, I wore earphones so people would assume I was on a call. But at home, there was no way to hide it.

One evening, lost in my world, I didn't notice my mother walking in. She froze for a moment, staring at me.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked, her face filled with confusion.

Tensed, I quickly replied, "No one. I was just singing a song."

She looked at me for a second longer, then walked away.

But it didn't stop there. It started happening more often. Every time she caught me, her expression grew more puzzled, more concerned. Soon, even my sister began noticing. She wouldn't say anything—just stare at me with silent confusion.

Then came my semester exams. I was sitting in the exam hall, answering the first two questions when my mind suddenly froze. My body broke into an uncontrollable sweat. A strange, unsettling feeling took over—an overwhelming mix of anger, confusion, and sadness, yet I couldn't figure out what was wrong.

Later that evening, I was at the abandoned park, cigarette in hand, lost in yet another scenario. But something felt... off. The story I was weaving seemed unclear, empty—like I had already lived it a hundred times. I glanced at my watch. It was past 7 p.m. I considered starting a new story but knew I wouldn't finish it tonight.

And then, the feeling returned. A cold shiver. A whirlpool of anger. A deep, restless sadness.

That night, I couldn't sleep. I lay in bed, tossing and turning, feeling like my world was crumbling. It was as if I had lost something, though I couldn't name what. Only after hours of exhaustion did I finally drift off.

The pressure was building. I had to focus on my studies—my future depended on it. I needed to clear all my backlogs and be well-versed in my subjects if I wanted a shot at a good job. But no matter how hard I tried, my mind refused to cooperate. Every time I sat down to study, within minutes, I found myself lost in my imagined world. My grades kept slipping.

I was failing.

I had more backlogs than anyone in my class. My final semester exams were only three months away, and if I didn't pass at least eight subjects, I wouldn't get

my diploma. The stress was suffocating. Yet, instead of studying, I buried myself deeper into my fantasies.

I smoked more. What started as two or three cigarettes a day turned into nine. Then sixteen. Almost two packs daily.

At college, I withdrew from people. I barely spoke. I felt lost, drifting through each day like a ghost.

Then, the final exams arrived.

Ali and Jack buckled down to prepare, and I tried to do the same. I gave it my all, writing nine exams, needing to pass at least eight. The night before my last test, we decided to drink. I agreed, thinking maybe a distraction would help—maybe spending time with people would calm me down.

That night, I called home and told my mother I was staying at a friend's place to study.

By midnight, I was drinking whiskey with Ali and Jack, chatting and laughing. For the first time in a long while, I felt light, free. No worries, no wicked thoughts. Just the warmth of alcohol and the comfort of company.

Around 2 a.m., we crashed at Jack's place.

"Hey, you know you have an exam tomorrow, right?" Jack asked, half-joking.

"Of course, I know," I replied.

At 5 a.m., Jack shook me awake, reminding me to get ready for the test. My head was pounding from the hangover. I tried to open my textbook and revise but gave up after a few minutes.

I had already written nine exams. I only needed to pass eight.

So I went back to sleep.

At 8 a.m., an hour before the exam, Jack tried waking me again.

"It's fine," I mumbled. "I won't write it. I'll still pass."

By noon, I was home.

"How was your exam?" my mother asked, her eyes bright with hope.

"It went well," I lied, then went straight to bed.

For the next month, I waited for my results. With no college to keep me occupied, I spent my days at the abandoned park, arriving around 11 a.m. and staying until 8 p.m. I barely ate. I didn't drink water.

This time, I had started stealing money from my mother's bank account to buy cigarettes.

My college was organizing a farewell party for us. I didn't want to go, but Ali and Jack insisted—it was our last day, after all. So, I went. But before long, the three of us sneaked out to drink just outside the college gates. When I walked back in, I acted as if nothing had happened. Later, I got pulled onto the dance floor. I was drunk, so I went along with it.

On the way back, Jack and Ali were feeling nostalgic, going on about how much fun they'd had. I nodded along, saying, "Yeah."

I wouldn't say I didn't have any fun in college, but I'd be lying if I said it was the same for me as it was for them. It could have been nice—if I were like them. Ali and Jack had been close since day one, their friendship extending beyond the classroom. But me? No matter how many people were in the room, I always felt like an outsider. Talking to people felt like a chore, like something I had to force myself to do. The silence that settled when I was alone with someone—it might have been normal for others, but for me, it felt suffocating.

As we walked, I finally spoke up. "You guys are lucky. You have each other—a real duo. I was always the odd one out."

Jack and Ali immediately objected. "What? Hey, that's not true."

A brief awkwardness filled the air. I knew what I'd said was childish, but wasn't that just who I was? Always looking for a sliver of attention, hoping someone would truly see me, care about me—and only me.

I never regretted feeling this way. I never regretted being this way.

Just a month later, news broke that the results would be out soon. The thought of not writing one of my exams unsettled me. But at the same time, I reassured myself—I had written nine exams. Even if I failed one, I'd still get my diploma.

In the peak of summer, Jack called me. "Hey, the results are in. Did you check?"

My heart pounded as I opened the website, entered my credentials, and waited. When the page loaded, my breath caught in my throat. I had passed seven subjects but failed two.

I froze.

I didn't know what was coming next. I didn't want to tell anyone. But Jack had already checked my results.

"Hey, so you still have a subject left, right?"

"Yeah."

"I told you to take that exam, but you didn't listen. Look what happened now."

He was right. This was my fault. My own incompetence had led me here. Deep down, I had known this would happen. There had been a feeling inside me from the start—a quiet, nagging voice telling me I would fail. But I ignored it.

There was no one else to blame. Like everything else that had happened to me, I had brought this upon myself.

A knock on my door. My father.

"Come out," he said, holding his phone. He looked at me and asked for my credentials. That's when I realized—he was going to check my results himself.

I gave them to him.

A few seconds later, his expression dropped. He looked at me, his disappointment palpable. Without a word, he hung up the phone.

My mother, sitting just beside me, asked, "What happened?"

My father answered for me. "What happened is—he failed."

A wave of shame washed over me. I stood there, silent, as my mother tried to stay optimistic. "It's fine," she said. "He can retake it next year and pass."

"Yes, nothing to worry about," my father added. "He's not the only one who failed. It's common. Let's just focus on what to do next."

Hearing their words, I felt like they were afraid. Afraid I might do something reckless. Afraid I might attempt suicide.

That evening, as I was about to leave the house, my mother stopped me. "Where are you going?"

It was unusual—she never asked me that. Going out around 5 p.m. was normal for me.

"Just out," I said, and left.

I went to the abandoned park, lit a cigarette, and stared into the lake. I wondered how easily I could end this shameless existence. Just a matter of seconds.



Then, a jolt of sense hit me. What was I even thinking? Suicide is for cowards. Even in my own imagination, I used to create scenarios where I gave speeches about how ending your own life was the ultimate disgrace. I had always believed that taking your own life was the greatest shame a soul could bear.

After that day, I stayed home for nearly a year. In August, I was told I could retake the exams—and if I passed, I'd finally get my diploma.

Every day at around 11 a.m., I would go to the park, sit by the lake, and talk to myself for hours—until 8pm Smoking nearly two packs a day.

People who passed by would sometimes glance at me like I was insane. Eventually, I became a familiar face. Some even approached me. "You're here every day, always on your phone. You know how hot it is out here?"

"Yeah, I know," I'd reply before brushing them off.

Each day, I created a new story in my head. Sometimes, I'd get stuck, as if my imagination had dried up. I'd grow tired of the same repetitive fantasies. But I always found something new. Imagination truly has no limits, I would tell myself.

At home, my parents often asked where I was going. I'd just shrug it off and say, "Meeting my friends."

There were times when my father's friends spotted me and mentioned it to him.

"Someone told me they saw you at that lake earlier," my father said.

"Yeah, I was with my friend," I said.

"It's far from here. How did you get there?"

"On my friend's motorcycle," I replied.

The park was only about two kilometers from my house. I always walked there—twenty, twenty-five minutes at most.

As the days passed, my isolation deepened. If I saw any of my old classmates or if Jack or Ali called me, I ignored them. I didn't want to be bothered. I just wanted to imagine. My stories were everything to me. Nothing brought me joy like weaving the perfect narrative by the end of the day.

Three months passed. My exams were here.

When I arrived at college, I was the only one from my batch. Everyone else had moved on to B.Tech for engineering. As I stepped onto campus, I felt a deep sense of unease—shame, maybe.

I sat down at my desk. A girl sat beside me. When I glanced at her, cold shivers ran down my body.

The invigilator approached, handed me the question paper, and asked for my credentials. I froze.

Every time someone looked at me or spoke to me, that same unsettling sensation returned—the same feeling I had walking to my desk in school. The same anxiety.

After the exam, I knew I would pass. It wasn't arrogance—it was confidence.

Two weeks later, the results came out. I passed.

I went to college to receive my diploma—alone, surrounded by juniors. The same teacher who once told me to stop blaming my father for forcing me into electronics handed me my mark sheet. I had scored around 66%.

He sighed, shaking his head. "You ruined your own life," he said. "If you're planning to do engineering, join here. I'll be around to guide you."

I agreed. Of course, I was going to be an engineer.

When my father heard about my results, all he said was, "If you had just studied from the start, none of this would've happened."

But I had no intention of settling for a job like my parents wanted. I didn't want to work under anyone. I didn't want to be looked down on. In my fantasies, I was the boss. I had everything I could ever imagine.

Reality, however, was the opposite. And maybe that's why I kept escaping into my imagination.

My fantasies became more complex. If Rias ever talked to someone else in my daydreams, I felt a deep jealousy that turned into uncontrollable rage. If every story had a happy ending, I'd get bored. So I created variations—scenarios where she would talk to another boy, and in response, I would leave her. When she tried to convince me to stay, I'd be furious.

But that anger didn't just stay in my imagination.

I found myself arguing in my head in the middle of the night, lost in what I called the endless war. It was me against me. These fantasies became more real than reality itself.

I convinced myself that reality was trash—there was nothing worth appreciating about it. In fits of rage, I punched walls until my knuckles bled. Sometimes I screamed, and my parents would rush to my room, asking what was wrong.

"I was just playing a video game," I'd lie.

Every second, I found myself talking to myself.

My perception of women had completely changed. The woman in my dreams—Rias Gremory—was perfect. Beautiful. Kind. She spoke only to me. Look only at me. Existed only for me.

Any girl who so much as spoke to another man was, in my eyes, a vile degenerate. I despised every woman I came across.

In my fantasies, even a girl talking to her own father felt wrong. The ideal woman, in my mind, was one who never spoke to, touched, or even thought of any man other than me for her entire existence.

My selfish notions waged countless battles in my head. And after each one, I was exhausted. Mentally drained. Broken.

My hatred for reality grew stronger. I would have sudden waves of anger for no reason. My mind was a storm.

I became more self-conscious. I stayed up creating fake scenarios until 3 a.m., only to wake up at 7. Running on no sleep, smoking 17 cigarettes a day, drowning in a volcano of emotions—

I am losing my mind....

# Fading Fragrance

As I walked to the park, as I usually did, a sharp pain shot through my left abdomen. Sweat poured down my face, and my skin crawled whenever I passed someone. My back was covered in rashes. I needed to understand what was happening to me, so I researched.

The vivid, all-consuming fantasies I created in my mind had a name—daydreams. But when these daydreams stretched on for hours, becoming immersive and uncontrollable, they were called maladaptive daydreaming. As I read more, I came across a list of symptoms. Maladaptive daydreamers often experience ADHD-like tendencies. They talk to themselves, make strange expressions, or engage in repetitive gestures.

My daily walks to the abandoned park had become an escape, but my daydreaming felt like poison in my veins. There was always a nagging sense of unease, as if something was off in my head. Whenever I walked beside someone, an overwhelming sense of inferiority took over. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was doing something wrong, but I had no idea what it was.

Amidst this haze, I was scrolling through the internet when I stumbled upon a page: EAMCET results are out! Wait... EAMCET? What? When did that happen? EAMCET was the entrance exam I was supposed to take. If I passed, I could get a scholarship for engineering. But I had been so lost in my own world that I hadn't even realized the exams had already happened.

Panic set in. I immediately called Jack. "When did the EAMCET exams take place?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Are you serious? They were two months ago. The results should be out by now."

His words hit me like a slap. I was in trouble—big trouble. That exam was my only chance to afford college, and I had missed it. I buried the secret deep inside me. There was no way I could tell my father.

A few days later, he called me. "What is this EAMCET?" he asked.

I scrambled for an excuse. "It's just an entrance exam... I couldn't take it because I was held back for a year." I tried to sound as if I genuinely hadn't known I was supposed to write it.

"Oh, I see. Okay," he said, his voice neutral.

Engineering colleges were opening in three months. Deep down, I knew I couldn't keep this truth hidden forever. But strangely, a part of me didn't care. I just wanted to daydream. Anytime something stressful or painful happened, I would retreat into my thoughts. It was my only refuge. But the peace didn't last.

A few days later, my father walked into my room. "Your teacher called. He said this EAMCET exam is important."

I tensed up. "I don't know... I was held back, so I didn't think I could take it."

He handed me the phone. "Here. Talk to him."

I took the phone hesitantly. "Hello?"

"It's me," the voice on the other end said. I recognized him instantly—the same teacher who had once encouraged me to join his college so he could guide me.

"Yes, sir," I mumbled.

"Why didn't you write the exam?" His tone was sharp.

"I... I was held back, so I didn't know if I could," I stammered.

"What are you even talking about? Why didn't you call me? Did you even ask anyone?" His voice was laced with frustration.

I swallowed hard. "I just... I don't know."

My father was staring at me, his expression unreadable but tense. It felt like he could strike me at any second.

"Hand the phone back to your father," the teacher said.

I obeyed. My father took the call, listening silently as the teacher spoke. After a moment, he looked at me. "Why didn't you ask me? Or at least ask your teacher about this?"



I lowered my head. "I didn't know... I just assumed I couldn't."

There was a long pause. "Oh, I see. Close your door," he said before walking out.

I always closed my door, and my father never liked it. He would tell me not to, but I always ignored him. But this time, when he told me to close the door, I knew exactly what it meant. He wasn't just upset—he was deeply disappointed.

The next day, my father went to the college and arranged an admission for me. Since I hadn't taken EAMCET, I had to join through a donation. The tuition fee was ₹35,000. That evening, he walked into my room. "You'll be going to college soon," he said simply.

It hit me then—despite the high tuition fees, despite my mistakes, he still wanted me to study. He wanted me to build a future, to get a job. But studying wasn't the problem. It was the job that terrified me.

The thought of waking up at 7 AM, going to work, coming home at 6 PM... spending my life away from home, away from the little world inside my mind—it made me sick. And if I ever got married? What if my wife had an affair while I was gone? The mere idea of her even talking to someone else made my blood boil. The thought of leaving her alone for hours, of being absent... it would eat me alive with anxiety. My mind was infected. If there were a way to erase these worthless, psychotic thoughts, I would. But this is who I am, and I can't help it.

Chest pains had become a routine for me. Every time I walked to the park, a sharp pain would stab at my left abdomen, making me anxious about what was happening to my body. After doing thorough research, I learned that smoking could block arteries in the heart, reducing blood flow and increasing the risk of

heart attacks and strokes. The realization terrified me—I wanted to quit, but smoking had become a part of me. I decided to take it slow, gradually cutting down from 17 cigarettes a day to 12, then 9, and eventually 5. I felt proud of my progress, yet a nagging thought haunted me: What's the point of quitting now? I've already done so much damage. Even if I turned my life around, got married, and had kids, after I died, she would just move on and marry someone else. These strange thoughts lingered in my mind, bringing a feeling I couldn't quite describe.

In my daydreams, I created a story set in a demon school. At first, it followed a single main character navigating his life, but after a few days, I would introduce another protagonist and shift the focus to him. Then another. And another. Soon, I had crafted ten different stories within the same world. But one day, something felt off. My daydreams, once vivid and immersive, now seemed hollow. I used to put so much effort into making the characters feel real, down to their expressions and emotions. Now, they felt incomplete. It was as if I had grown bored of my own imagination.

Lost in thought, I left home, hoping sleep would clear my mind, but that night, I lay awake, feeling broken—like my story was ruined. The next day, I tried adding a new character, and for a moment, it felt right. But then, the same emptiness crept in. I was losing my mind. No matter how many variations I tried, something was missing. Eventually, I found that shifting the story to a completely different universe helped. A fresh setting brought back some of the spark.

Meanwhile, I continued my struggle to quit smoking. Reducing my intake to just three cigarettes a day was incredibly difficult, but I pushed through. Then college started. It was my first day. As I walked into class, I saw only two girls sitting there—no boys. They greeted me, but I ignored them. A few minutes later, the teacher walked in and stood in front of the girls. She turned to me and asked, "Are you Lateral Entry?"

I didn't hear her properly, but I still nodded. She continued asking me questions, but I couldn't make out a single word. My hands were shaking, sweat dripping down my face. Ever since my diploma graduation, when I was held back, I had

barely spoken to anyone. I spent most of my time outside, lost in my daydreams, avoiding conversations at home, and keeping my earphones on at full volume—sometimes even without music. Maybe that's why I struggled to hear her. Maybe that's why I felt so uneasy. The teacher and the two girls stared at me. I was sure they thought I was a lunatic with the way I was acting. The moment I saw an opportunity, I left the classroom and went to the woods behind the college—the same place where I used to spend hours smoking. I sat there, lit a cigarette, and daydreamed until 4 p.m. before heading home.

The next day, more students arrived—four or five boys and five girls. I greeted one of them, but there was this one guy who seemed unwelcome, so I ignored him and sat at the last desk. A guy sat beside me, and we exchanged names. I told him I was held back a year. After a few days, I felt off. These new classmates... they felt indifferent toward me. In my diploma days, I always had everyone's attention; they listened to everything I said. Maybe that's why I disliked these new classmates—they didn't care about me.

Every day, I stayed in class until 12:30, then escaped to the woods to daydream. College left me with little time for my fantasies. Before, I would go to the park at 11 a.m. and return at 8 p.m. Now, I was stuck in class until 5 p.m. This lack of time only made things worse. My stories felt even more incomplete, making my nights restless. I stayed up until 3 a.m. trying to fix them, but nothing worked. A terrifying thought crept into my mind—I was losing my ability to daydream. I had never truly considered quitting. The idea of living without my fantasies made me feel empty, unimportant. So, I began skipping college every Saturday, giving myself two full days to daydream. It helped, but not enough.

Since my college was far, I spent a lot of time on the bus, drowning in music. When I did go to class, I kept conversations to a minimum. The guy who sat beside me, Dan, seemed like a good person. The unwelcome guy, Seth, turned out to be Dan's close friend. Eventually, I started spending time with them. One day in class, I was explaining my daydreaming to Seth. He listened with a small smile, and I assumed he thought I was crazy. But then, he said, "I also daydream." I was a bit confused as Seth opened up about his life and hardships.

Then, the realization hit me like a freight train—I wasn't the only one going through tough times. Compared to his struggles, mine felt insignificant.

Sharing the same ground in daydreaming, Seth and I grew close. As days passed, my new classmates started showing interest in me. I spent most of my time learning, reading books, browsing the internet, and watching biographies to include in my daydreams. Because of that, I had a good grasp of certain topics, often surprising my classmates with random bits of knowledge. The look on their faces was priceless—I loved that feeling. I liked it when people looked at me as if I were someone above them.

In class, I always steered clear of girls, not even making eye contact. My classmates teased me, saying I was "afraid of girls," just like Jack and Ali. But I was used to it. It had been at least six years since I had held a proper conversation with a girl other than my sister or mother. I couldn't even look them in the eye. But then, there was this girl. She was beautiful and always calm. One afternoon, I skipped class and went into the woods. Another classmate of mine was there—he barely showed up to college at all. As I smoked, I told him about the girl in our class, how quiet she was, how she didn't talk to anyone. He suggested I text her. The idea lingered in my mind, but I didn't have her number. That evening, I ran into Jack. We talked for a bit, and he also insisted I text her. Under peer pressure, I got her number from the class group chat and sent her a message: "Hi, it's me..." I waited. And waited. But the reply never came. I was sure she didn't want to respond.

Every morning, after taking a shower, I felt uneasy. My daydream sessions were being pushed aside, and every day felt like a drag. Whenever I could, I went to the park to daydream, but I couldn't focus like before. My fantasies required my absolute attention to be as vivid as possible. But as time passed, my responsibilities grew—college, studies—I couldn't daydream like I used to. It felt like a part of me was being ripped away.

Then I got a call. It was Max. He always called me for no reason, just to chat, but I, who was fully submerged in my own world, always ignored him. He was relentless. When I walked to the abandoned park, some of my old school classmates would see me, but with my earphones on, I would just walk away.

They began noticing me more and more. One day, Max called me and insisted that we meet. I told him to come to the abandoned park, and he did. Seeing him after what felt like an eternity, he had changed a lot. He also picked up smoking. We both sat there.

“So what are you doing here, everyday?” he asked.

I replied, “I just walk, listen to music, that’s all.”

“Walk? You come here by walking, that’s like 30 minutes for coming to the park and another 30 minutes for going home.”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said.

Max looked at me and said, “You know everyone thinks you are crazy, right?”

Confused, I asked, “What?”

“Most of our classmates see you walking on the streets everyday and they began rumors that you are crazy and weird.”

I wasn’t quite shocked by what he said, as my actions backed his words, but what he did say after was shocking. “You need to do a comeback, bro,” Max said with a sharp look in his eyes.

“Comeback? What comeback!”

“I know you are smart. I know that. You just need to focus, and you’ll turn your life around.”

I brushed his words off. He offered to drop me at home, and as we were going, he kept saying, “I’m just waiting for your comeback, man. I know you’ll make it, just don’t care what others think.”

Listening to his words gave me comfort. It had been so long since I heard someone say they believed in me. But that fire didn’t last long. The next day, I went back to my routine fantasies.

During these daydreaming sessions at the park, I would sometimes hit a dead-end. Daydreaming the same story over and over again would make me feel uninterested, so I would change it all the time. Going to college made it impossible for me to daydream as I couldn't live a parallel life, and I couldn't choose either. The thought of quitting daydreaming didn't exist in my mind, as I always had this fear: at some point, I have to stop being a lunatic, then what? It was a question I wasn't ready to face, as there was a fear in my mind that I would destroy myself. With these un-ending thoughts, as I was returning home, I was close to Max's home. "Maybe I should visit him?" It's fine, I'll meet him again. The next day, I was at home eating, and I got a phone call from an old classmate.

"Hey, where are you?" he asked, his voice stuttering.

"At home," I replied. Cutting his voice, he said, "Max is dead. He had a heart attack."

Time froze as I tried to process what he just said. "Come to the hospital and bring Ash with you."

I got up, went to Ash, and went to the hospital, but by the time I arrived, his body had already been moved. As I sat outside of the hospital, I felt sadness—no, it was like a thought of missing something. My memories with Max rained my eyes with tears as I went home.

A few days prior, I kept hitting bumps. When I start losing details in the story, when it begins to feel incomplete, when repeating it over and over makes me lose interest in the characters. Over the years, I had abandoned many characters this way. I tried replacing them, imagining someone else in their place. A fear of ever having to replace Rias had always been on the back of my mind but felt impossible.

RIAS.

She was the one character I could never lose interest in. She was perfect. I always knew, deep inside, that using a character too much would eventually make me lose interest, and when that happened, they would be gone forever. But not Rias. Never her. I fantasized about her many times, but never have I ever felt anything other than love.

With my semester results, I am now left with 7 backlogs, and it has just been a year. Trying to balance daydreaming and living daily life felt impossible, and so everyday I would have swings of unsettledness, and slowly I was losing interest in the daydreams. One day, I came home with a painful realization—I had nothing left to daydream about. For the past week, I had been forcing the story forward, pushing it further and further, but I couldn't do it anymore.

"That night, seeking a distraction, I texted a friend. He offered some motivation, and so... March 6th—my birthday. I resolved to change everything about myself. I wanted to stop daydreaming, quit smoking, start anew—be reborn. I wanted to write, to write about myself. When I talked to people about it, they laughed, saying, 'What have you achieved to write a book?' Well, they had a point. But I didn't want that to distract me; I wanted to give it my all.

But I couldn't. I couldn't even endure half a day without the voices in my head. I wasn't saddened by this; I accepted it. However, something else troubled me. Recently, I've been drifting away from my daydreams. In college, I'd spent every free moment immersed in my stories. Now, my thoughts were fragmenting, replaced by fleeting images of my real life. Initially, this didn't concern me. Until one night."

I was in my room, lost in the usual story of Rias. But this time, I didn't finish it. I felt... uninterested.

“But it’s Rias! How could I feel uninterested in her?”

Determined to fix it, I decided to start fresh the next day. A new story. A new beginning. But the same thing happened. The feeling of incompleteness. Something was off. That night, I lost it. A storm of emotions—rage, confusion, denial. A voice inside me whispered a horrifying thought: "You’ve lost interest in Rias."

No. That’s impossible. That can’t be true. I told myself I just needed to try harder. And so I did. Again. And again. But every time, the result was the same. A hollow emptiness in my heart. I spent most nights on the brink of insanity. Restless. Tears slipped from my eyes. My head is burning with sweat.

“There’s no way I could lose Rias. I just couldn’t.”

I forced myself to calm down, to think of a solution. This is important. Without these voices, without my stories, I knew what would happen. I would kill myself. And I wasn’t afraid of the thought. Since college started, a part of me had already opened that door—self-harm as an option. I felt incomplete. Worthless. The voices in my head had been there for me through everything. They were the only thing that kept me going. I wasn’t strong enough to let them go. And if they left me... I would rather let this worthless life go.

I kept trying to replace Rias with other characters, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t. Every moment felt unsettling, like something was missing—something I could never get back. I’ve been exhausted—completely drained. I feel broken. The thought of ending my life has lingered in my mind. I told myself it was just a passing feeling, something that would fade once I felt a



little better. But I was wrong. At the end of the day, I just wanted out. I wanted it all to stop.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized—it wasn't just about daydreaming. It was about me. I have always felt worthless. My own ideals, my way of thinking, have never allowed me peace. What I want is unreachable. I am too childish to accept what's in front of me. The feeling I long for is non-existent. It is not about daydreams, it is not about my daily life, it is about peace. Living for me is nothing but a drag, a weight I couldn't carry anymore. Surviving in this world, among these people, feels impossible. And it's no one's fault but my own.