

•

second row, second seat

Ashutosh Vishwakarma

Contents

1	The Entry	1
2	First Interaction	9
3	Introspection	18
4	Outcast	23
5	Liminal	29
6	Off Guard	35
7	Retort	40
8	Masks	44

The Entry

It was the first day after summer vacation, and June still clung to the air like a heavy blanket. The fans on the classroom ceiling dragged themselves in slow circles, pushing warm air from one corner to another. Shirts stuck to backs, ties tightened for morning assembly still refused to loosen their grip on sweaty necks. Seventh graders filled the room with chatter. A month apart felt like a year at their age. Everyone had stories to tell and voices seemed to rise from every bench—except the last one, where Shiva sat with his usual companions, Vijay and Rajveer. The three of them—self-declared Tridev—leaned close, talking as if the rest of the class didn’t exist.

“So, where did you go this time?” Shiva asked, pulling at his tie until the knot finally gave up. Vijay grinned. “To my mama’s place. He has a big fishpond now. I even

went with him for a fish catch. They use those huge nets, you know? One pull and you get hundreds. He's doing well—government job, side business... everything." Rajveer nodded. "Fisheries is good money. My uncle also has ponds. People earn a lot." Vijay puffed up a little. "And my elder uncle might become village head this time. He even lets villagers fish for free sometimes. Gains goodwill that way." Shiva listened, nodding, though something tight curled in his chest. He had nothing grand like this to share—no ponds, no wealthy relatives, no election-bound uncles. That small pinch of insignificance, the kind he never admitted to anyone, settled quietly inside him. So he reached for the one thing he did have—knowledge. "I read that the economy's improving," he said. "Lot of privatization now. The government is pushing business growth." Vijay snapped his fingers. "Oh! I also read about INS Vikramaditya. India got it from Russia. It's massive! Like a whole city floating." "What does it do?" Rajveer asked. "It carries fighter jets," Vijay said dramatically. "Just imagine—planes taking off from the sea!"

Before anyone could reply, the classroom door swung open. Like a wave, every student scrambled back to their seats. Books snapped shut, whispers died mid-sentence. "Good morning, Ma'am!" the class chorused. Ms. Sneha entered with her attendance register tucked under her arm. Her smile was warm—the kind that made even the boring subjects feel interesting. Shiva liked her classes. She explained Social Science like it was some story unfolding around them,

not just printed text to memorize. She began calling out names. One by one, students stood and answered. “Present, Ma’am.” “Present, Ma’am.” The rhythm was familiar, almost comforting, even with fifty-plus students in the room. Shiva wasn’t paying much attention—until a soft voice interrupted the routine.

“My name is Gauri Mishra. I studied previously in the city.” The sound penetrated Shiva’s ears like arrows piercing through gut. Such soft sooth tone, “who is she?” he thought. His head lifted before he even realized it. She stood in the second row, first bench, her chin slightly raised as if she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to be here. Pink frameless spectacles rested neatly on her nose. Two pony-tails fell over her shoulders, tied tight and perfectly even. Something about her speech—clear, calm, practiced—made the whole room seem quieter to Shiva. The heat, the fans, even Vijay’s previous excitement... everything faded a little. He kept watching. Not staring, exactly—just drawn in, as if she were a new word in a book he wanted to understand. The rest of the class buzzed on, but Shiva barely heard any of it. The period ended quicker than he wanted. When the bell rang, he almost jolted upright. “I’ll be back,” he muttered to his friends and immediately walked toward the front benches. He didn’t dare speak to Gauri. Even looking at her too long felt like breaking some rule. Instead, he stopped beside Divya, who sat next to her.

“Hi, Divya. How are you?” Divya raised an eyebrow. “So you remembered I exist?” Shiva laughed awkwardly.

“Hey—those two kept talking. I meant to come earlier.” Her teasing softened into a smile. She clearly understood why he had suddenly found the front benches so interesting. On the second bench, Mohit sat hunched over his notebook. Shiva tapped the desk. “Mohit, can you move a bit? I need to sit here.” Mohit brightened instantly. “Sure!” Shiva sat down behind Gauri. Not close enough to draw attention—just close enough to see the tiny strands of hair escaping her ponytail, the slight tilt of her head when she read something, the city-girl confidence in the way she straightened her posture. For the first time that day, the heat didn’t bother him anymore.

The next period was Science. The moment Mr. Arvind Rai stepped into the room, the class rose again in a messy chorus. “Good morning, sir!” Shiva usually brightened at the sight of Mr. Arvind. Science was his subject—his territory. But today his mind was elsewhere, drifting around the first bench where Gauri sat, her ponytails perfectly still even in the warm breeze from the windows. He didn’t even notice the commotion until a sharp voice cracked through his thoughts. “Shiva! You, too, haven’t completed the homework?” The class froze. Mr. Arvind’s eyes were fixed on him, brows pulled tight. Shiva blinked. Around him, several students were standing with notebooks open. His stomach dropped. “Were you playing all summer?” Mr. Arvind demanded. “Why is your homework incomplete?” “No, sir!” Shiva shot up immediately. “I—I did my homework. All of it. Even made the diagram on chart paper. It’s... in my

bag.” A ripple of murmurs spreads. Someone snickered. And just for a moment, as Shiva glanced ahead, he caught Gauri turning slightly—her lips curled in a quiet, teasing smile. A smile meant to mock him. Yet it somehow made his heart jump. “So you forgot to bring your bag?” Mr. Arvind’s voice softened into a mocking tone. “No, sir! It’s just... I changed my seat.” Shiva hurried across the room to the last bench, fumbling with his bag. He pulled out the neatly finished homework and the chart paper. Mr. Arvind followed, checked the work, then signed it. “Since you’ve changed your seat, sit here now,” he ordered, pointing to the last bench he had his bag on. “Yes, sir,” Shiva replied, settling down with heat rising in his cheeks. He kept his gaze low. Great first impression, he thought bitterly. What must she think now? Some careless boy who forgets his homework? I’m the topper... she won’t know that. He risked a tiny glance at her. But she was already looking ahead, attentive, ready for the lesson. Whatever expression she’d had earlier was gone, replaced by calm focus.

Mr. Arvind began explaining the chapter on the water cycle. Pages flipped. Pens clicked. Slowly, Shiva’s embarrassment loosened its grip as the lesson pulled him in. Water moving through clouds and mountains... traveling for centuries... shaping life, shaping earth. He imagined rivers carving their way through stone, raindrops falling before humans ever existed. The thought soothed him—water had patience, purpose. Maybe he could too.

By the time the bell rang after four periods, the classroom

transformed instantly. The “recess bell” didn’t ring—the class exploded. Benches rattled as kids shot up like springs. Some rushed to the washroom, some sprinted to the playground, and some clustered around the lunches. Shiva didn’t bring lunch anymore. Carrying a tiffin felt childish, like something kids in lower classes still did. Instead, he joined the familiar wandering tribe—those who survived on bites stolen from friends’ lunchboxes. He followed Vijay and Rajveer, hopping booth-to-booth like food pirates. Aryan’s lunchbox was the biggest treasure. He always brought the good stuff—maggi, sandwiches, aloo-paratha. Naturally, it disappeared within seconds. Aryan stared at the empty box like a man betrayed. “I swear I’m not bringing lunch from tomorrow,” he muttered. “I barely get two bites of my own food.” From the side, Suraj grinned. “Why? Is suji running out in your shop?” Laughter burst across the group. Even Shiva cracked up as they drifted toward the next target. When the raid was over, Suraj opened his own steel lunchbox with exaggerated hope—only for the group to collectively groan. “Seriously? Karela?” Aryan recoiled. “Who brings bitter gourd on the first day? Want us to celebrate with poison?” Suraj shrugged happily, already chewing. “I don’t have a suji shop like you, Aryan. We have this. Eat if you want—I don’t stop anyone.” Aryan walked away with a smug look on his face. Shiva wiped tears of laughter from his eyes.

Just then, Vijay slid back into the room, drifting on the dusty floor as if performing some stunt. “Let’s go to the

ground!” he declared. “Isn’t it boiling hot outside?” Aryan asked. Rajveer smirked. “Why scared? Sun will burn you? Don’t be like girls hiding from the heat.” With that unbeatable logic, the boys exchanged glances—then gave in. Shiva, Vijay, Aryan, and Rajveer headed out into the sunlit corridor, laughter trailing behind them like shadows stretching in the afternoon light.

The final bell rang, and just like that, the day dissolved into the familiar rush of feet and voices. Shiva walked out with the seventh-grade boys, a strange mix of joy and nervous energy pulsing through him. He had met his friends again, shared laughter, stolen lunch bites—but Gauri’s face kept flashing before his eyes like a sudden spark. Every time the memory surfaced, a smile slipped onto his face without warning. But school was over now. Time to go home. Two long columns—girls on one side, boys on the other—began marching down the school street like Roman legions called to formation. Teachers stood at intervals, trying to hold the fragile order together. Younger classes led the way, followed by the older ones, drifting forward like slow-moving waves. School vans filled one after another, swallowing lines of students. The quiet discipline of the morning was replaced with noise from every direction—shouts, laughter, horns, sandals scraping the dusty ground. Ms. Sneha finally instructed the seventh-grade girls to move, then the boys. Shiva joined the tail end of the line.

He climbed into the school van—“the magic,” as everyone called it—and slipped into the back seat, the one that could

fit three. It was his favorite spot. From there he could see the road stretching behind them, and it was where Krishna, a ninth grader he admired, usually sat. They weren't exactly neighbors, but their houses were close enough that Shiva felt a natural fondness for him. As the van rolled out of the parking lot and merged onto the highway, Shiva barely registered the traffic. His mind replayed the moment in science class again and again. Had he ruined his first impression? Did she think he was careless? Foolish? He stared out of the back window, watching other school vans pass by, buses packed with older students, and clusters of seniors riding bicycles with practiced ease. And then, suddenly, his gaze froze. Across the highway, walking alone with a handkerchief held over her face to block the dust and heat—was Gauri. Shiva's spine stiffened. His breath caught. Their eyes met for the briefest heartbeat through the moving window. Just a second. Maybe less. But she looked at him. And he looked back. Then she lowered her head, and the moment slipped away as the van moved ahead. Shiva leaned back slowly, heat rushing to his cheeks, heart pounding like he had just won something enormous. He felt weightless. Over the moon. For the first time all day, he wasn't thinking about homework or embarrassment or anything else. She had seen him. And that was enough.

First Interaction

The second seat of the second row had quietly become Shiva's place. Vijay followed him there without question—Vijay behind Divya, and Shiva directly behind Gauri. Yet Shiva still hadn't spoken a single word to her. It surprised even him. He was usually effortless with people, the kind who could strike up a conversation with anyone. Talking to girls had never made him nervous. But this time, something invisible held him back. What would she think of me? The question circled endlessly in his head. Gauri carried herself differently—confident, composed, almost distant. She barely spoke, except to Divya beside her. Shiva watched her from behind, wondering how she would react if he suddenly spoke. What if she brushed him off? Worse—what if she smiled politely and turned away, as if he didn't matter at all? And even if he did speak... what would he say? Thoughts

crowded his mind, one after another, until he finally gave up and turned his attention to the blackboard, his books, his friends—anything that might quiet the noise inside his head. But Gauri refused to stay out of it. Sometimes, as she leaned forward during class, her ponytails would slip back and brush against the edge of his notebook. Each time it happened, his pen paused mid-word, his thoughts drifting helplessly toward her again. Sitting behind her had been a mistake, he decided. From another row, at least he could steal a glance—catch a glimpse of her face. Now, she was closer than ever, yet somehow farther away. The old line drifted into his mind without invitation: darkness beneath the lamp. It felt painfully true.

On that day, the Math teacher was absent. On such days, it was customary for a replacement teacher to arrive—usually someone borrowed from another wing of the school. Until then, the class was left to its own devices. Shiva, the class monitor, took it upon himself to “manage” things. He walked up and down the aisles with an air of quiet importance. Not the tyrant kind of monitor—the ones who scribbled names on the blackboard and acted like miniature dictators—but the friendly sort. No threats. No punishments. No shouting. Students moved from bench to bench freely. Conversations floated across the room. Shiva himself had no real reason to be at half the desks he visited, but walking around felt right. After all, this was what being monitor looked like. Still, it wasn’t chaos. There was laughter, gossip, shifting seats—but no screaming, no desks overturned.

Shiva's only rule was simple: if a teacher walked in, the class should look like a class. And eventually, one did. She was from the junior wing—one of those teachers who taught kindergarten students, maybe up to third standard at most. Shiva noticed her just as she reached the doorway. Oh, no. Not her, he thought. The moment she stepped inside, the class snapped into silence. Students hurried back to their seats as if someone had pulled an invisible string. Shiva slid back into the third row, settling into the seat of the friend he had been talking to moments earlier. The room fell unnaturally quiet—like a tired animal collapsing after a long run. No one spoke. From beside Shiva, a boy leaned in and whispered, “Why don’t you ask her for a quiz during this free period?” Shiva sighed. “Do you really think she’ll agree?” “What else are we going to do for the whole period?” the boy pressed. Shiva glanced toward the teacher, then back at the class. Should I ask? he wondered. Quizzes were his strength. He liked them. He prepared for them. Not only that, but he and a few others had memorized almost the entire Lucent’s General Knowledge book—dates, facts, capitals—just in case moments like these appeared out of nowhere. And now, one had. Shiva straightened slightly, still unsure, but the thought had already rooted itself in his mind.

“Ma’am, can we have a quiz, please?” Shiva asked, his voice soft, almost pleading. The teacher paused and looked around, scanning the room as if trying to locate the disturbance. Shiva quickly stood up, saving her the trouble. “Ma’am, please,” he added. “We still have a lot of time.”

She adjusted her spectacles, unimpressed. "I don't think anyone would even join," she said calmly. "Most of you are busy anyway. It's better to do your homework while you have free time." "But ma'am," Shiva persisted, "we don't have any homework. It's only the second period. Many of us want to have a small round." A sudden chorus erupted from Shiva's row. "Yes, ma'am!" The teacher hesitated for a moment, then sighed lightly. "Alright," she said. "Those who want a quiz—raise your hands." Instantly, almost every boy shot his hand into the air. A few girls followed, glancing at one another before committing. Those already participating began nudging their neighbors, whispering encouragement, urging more hands up. Within seconds, the decision was obvious. The quiz was inevitable.

"No, ma'am. They'll disturb us. I'm reading right now." Gauri's voice cut cleanly through the room. Shiva blinked, momentarily caught off guard. Reading? Right now? He glanced around—no books open, nothing urgent in sight. "But ma'am," he said, turning back to the teacher, "everyone wants to play." The teacher considered this, then spoke firmly. "Alright. Those who want to have a quiz may do so, but there must be no nuisance. Those who want to read will read. No one disturbs anyone." "They always say that, ma'am," Gauri replied at once. Her voice was steady, edged with resolve. "They make a lot of noise and disturb everyone." A few girls nodded in agreement. "Stop her, Shiva," the boy beside him whispered. "She won't let us have even a small quiz. Who does she think she is?" Shiva exhaled. So be

it, he thought. Duty to the comrades. “They’re just scared to lose, ma’am,” he said, his tone light but pointed. The words landed harder than he expected. Gauri straightened in her seat and turned halfway around. “Who do you think you are?” she shot back. “You act like you’re so smart—but you’re not.” The class fell silent. Shiva said nothing. Bragging had never been his way, and defending himself now felt unnecessary. He could feel eyes on him—from every corner of the room. “What is this behavior?” the teacher snapped. “What is your name?” “Gauri, ma’am,” she replied, her voice controlled but tight. “Gauri,” the teacher said, each syllable heavy with warning, “if you don’t want to join, you may continue your work. But this is not how you speak. Apologize to Shiva.” For a moment, Gauri stayed still. Then, without looking at him, she said softly, “Sorry.” Her face flushed red as she turned back to her desk and sat down, shoulders stiff with anger and frustration. The air in the classroom remained tense—charged, unsettled—as if something fragile had just been cracked.

The quiz commenced with the teacher pulling out a scrap of paper to keep score, dividing the class into two halves — two rows each—with Shiva and Gauri standing in opposite camps, though it hardly seemed at first that she intended to participate at all. Questions began flying back and forth, and Shiva answered many with ease, supported by the usual quiz enthusiasts, while his team’s secret weapon—a boy famously nicknamed Inventor for his uncanny memory of obscure innovations and their creators—left the oppos-

ing side helpless with questions about forgotten inventors of washing machines, automatic rifles, and countless other oddities, pushing the score steadily upward. Then, unexpectedly, Gauri stood up from the other side and asked, “What is the full form of ALU?” Shiva almost laughed to himself—wasn’t this taught in third grade?—and replied instantly, “Arithmetic and Logic Unit,” finishing with a faint, taunting smile as another point was added and Gauri sat down in silence, visibly embarrassed. By the time the bell rang, the gap was humiliating—the opposing team hadn’t even managed half of Shiva’s score—and though it was a clear victory, Shiva found no real joy in it, his thoughts already spiraling elsewhere: Was it worth it? Had he angered her beyond repair? Had he embarrassed her too much? The thrill of winning faded quickly, drowned beneath a growing guilt that refused to quiet down.

As usual, school ended, yet Shiva never found the courage to speak to her. Their very first interaction had gone so wrong that it only deepened the distance he already felt, and by the time he reached home, guilt and remorse clung to him like dust after a long walk. After lunch, he sat beside his Nani as the afternoon settled into the house. She broke the silence first. “Ramujagir’s tractor will come to our field today for ploughing. You go and keep an eye on it—these days they’ve grown lazy. A few rounds on the topsoil, corners untouched, and they leave.” Shiva asked quietly, “What time did he say?” “Five in the evening,” she replied. “Alright, I’ll go. Where is Mama? Isn’t he coming?” “No, he’s gone to

town for some work,” she said, shaking her head. “People to-day don’t know how much hard work farming takes. Others in the village are growing vegetables, selling in the market, doing well. Your Nana managed a government job and still farmed. He would plough the fields before dawn with oxen and then leave for work.” Her voice softened into a sigh as they sat together in the hall, surrounded by fading portraits of Nana and cousins lining the walls, watching the afternoon drift past in quiet remembrance.

While sitting there, Shiva noticed two familiar figures pass along the road in front of his house—Rohan and Manoj, village friends and neighbors—waving exaggeratedly for him to join them. He got up, crossed the yard, and met them beneath a nearby bael tree. “Are you coming for the cricket match today?” Rohan asked. “I have to go to the fields,” Shiva replied briskly, leaning against the thin trunk. “Ramujagir is coming to plough.” Manoj plucked a leaf and began stripping its hard vein with his teeth. “When will you be back? You can join even if it’s late. We’ll play one or two matches till then.” “He told me to come at five,” Shiva said, sinking his weight further into the tree. “He’s ploughing Tedhiya—it’s not very big. Should take about an hour.” Rohan nodded. “Alright. We’re going to call the others and will leave by four. We’ll catch you there, then? At least come—don’t make excuses this time.” The three of them leaned against the tree, slowly curling around it like snakes around a sandalwood trunk, when a voice called out from the house. “Shiva!” “Coming, Nani,” he called back, straight-

ening himself. He walked away with steady steps, leaving the tree quiet again in the afternoon heat. Back inside, he sat beside Nani once more, resting his head in her lap, his eyes drifting toward the clock. Her soft fingers moved gently through his hair, and a deep sense of peace settled over him. Slowly, his eyelids grew heavy, and he drifted into sleep.

“Bhaiya ... bhaiya ... wake up.” Rahul — Mama’s younger son — was shaking his arm gently, his voice tugging him out of sleep. Shiva stirred on the same sofa where he had dozed off earlier. From the inner gallery, where Nani sat on her small daybed, her voice followed, firm with concern. “It’s already five, Shiva. The tractor must have reached the fields by now.” He pushed himself upright, sleep still clinging to his eyes. “Bring the cycle,” he said calmly, and headed toward the backyard alley. After washing his face and having a cup of tea, he set off for the fields.

Returning home late from the cricket match with his friends, he had dinner and went straight to his bed. He opened his books, but his mind refused to stay with the pages, drifting instead into a tangle of thoughts. Sleep wouldn’t come. After a while, realizing he hadn’t read a single word, he pushed the books aside and lay back. His eyes settled on the ceiling fan above, slicing warm air through the room in slow, steady circles. Wide awake after a day crowded with events, he stared on, thoughts whispering endlessly. I shouldn’t talk to her. She doesn’t want to talk to me at all. I don’t want to upset her even more. Today was already enough. The fan kept turning, and his thoughts kept

wandering.

Introspection

Shiva came to class and took his usual place—the second bench in the second row—but this time he was unusually quiet. He didn’t speak to Vijay or Rajveer, not even in passing. Ms. Sneha went over the answers from the chapter they had just finished, and he copied them down without a word. The loose strands from Gauri’s ponytails still brushed the edge of his notebook now and then, but each time, he shifted it away, creating a careful distance. The period dragged on, and when the bell finally announced recess, Shiva slipped out of the classroom without waiting for anyone, sidestepping the familiar rush and noise, and stopped in the corridor. After a while, Divya joined him. “What happened?” she asked. “You’re unusually quiet today.” “Nothing... nothing,” Shiva replied quickly. “It was just a bit hot inside, so I came out for some air.” “Oh, don’t hide,”

Divya said gently. “I know everything.” “What everything? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, forcing a faint smile. “Believe it or not, I understand,” she continued. “Just don’t take it too seriously. She’s always a little rude.” Shiva gripped the corridor railing, warm from the sun. “She isn’t angry with you at all,” Divya added. Just then, Rajveer walked up. “Why are you two standing here?” he asked. “Nothing,” Divya replied softly, a sigh slipping into her voice. “Just waiting for recess to end.” “Isn’t today the selection for the morning assembly prayer group?” Rajveer asked. “Yes,” Divya said, her eyes lighting up. “I almost forgot. I think Gauri will join it.” Without saying anything, Shiva turned back toward the classroom, his head lowered as he returned to his seat.

Then came the uneasy moments before the final bell—the time when the class teacher arrived to sign everyone’s homework diary. Shiva’s heart sank. He hadn’t written homework for a single subject, yet the signature was unavoidable. He leaned toward Vijay. “Have you written your homework in the diary?” he asked quickly. “No,” Vijay replied with a grin, nodding toward Divya, who was busy filling out both her own diary and his. “Oh. Great,” Shiva muttered, defeated. Divya soon stood up and walked to the podium with both diaries in hand. Shiva hesitated, then glanced toward Gauri. She was already absorbed in a book. For a moment, he almost gave up—but then, summoning what little courage he had, he raised his trembling hand and gently tapped her shoulder. She turned sharply, surprise flashing across her

eyes as she looked at him. “Have you completed your diary today?” he asked softly. Without a word, she slid her diary onto his desk. “Yes... return it quickly,” she said. “Sure. Thank you,” Shiva replied, picking it up at once. He began copying carefully, letter by letter, as if precision might somehow steady his nerves. A few minutes later, he placed the diary back on her desk. “Thank you,” he said, then added, almost involuntarily, “Your handwriting is really nice.” She paused. “No one says that. You might be the first,” she replied. “No, I mean the way you write ‘S’” he said with a small smile. “It’s very curved.” “Oh... thanks,” she said, already turning back to her book, the moment slipping away as quietly as it had come.

He boarded his van as he always did. Across the highway, Gauri walked on the opposite side, a handkerchief held lightly to her face—a sight that had quietly turned into a ritual. She never really looked at him, perhaps a passing glance on rare days, nothing more. Still, staying at home had begun to feel unbearable. Her presence lingered in his thoughts long after she disappeared from view.

Back home, he ate lunch and slept through the afternoon, exhaustion mixing with restlessness. As the sun began to soften, he grabbed his bicycle, slipped his Micromax keypad phone and earphones into his pocket, and headed out, casually mentioning at home that he was going to check on the crops—crops that didn’t really exist. The countryside, as always, held its quiet treasures: peace suspended in the air, unbroken and generous.

He left his bicycle beneath a tree in a bagh, a small orchard with only a handful of mango trees and a dense stand of bamboo along one edge. It lay far from both village and home—the nearest house more than two kilometers away. In the distance, the sun sank slowly, painting the sky in deep reds and spreading its glow across the trees. Below his fields stretched a dry riverbed, bare as bone for now, waiting for the monsoon to swell it into a river that would feel like a sea in its own right. Occasionally, herds of cows and buffaloes emerged on the horizon, moving lazily across the land. Everything felt quiet—serene, almost unreal—peaceful in a way that felt nothing short of magical.

How vast this world is, he thought. In all his life, he had barely stepped beyond the familiar—just the stretch between his own home and his mama’s village, seventy or eighty kilometers apart, a place he had known since childhood. Two places. That was all. What lay beyond that—what was hidden inside those distant villages? How would it feel to wander through their narrow alleys, to live a life entirely unknown to him? His gaze settled on a tiny cluster of houses across the riverbank, no more than specks against the fading light, and his thoughts drifted with them.

Then, inevitably, his mind circled back to Gauri. Does it really matter if she talks to me or not? he wondered. And even if she did—what then? Shouldn’t I be focusing on myself? One day, he would see the whole world. He knew that. Why should he anchor himself here, weighed down by someone else’s opinions, when there was so much waiting

beyond this river, beyond this village, beyond himself?

Outcast

It was a gentle morning. The sun was still rising, far from its full strength, and the sky lay heavy with scattered dark clouds. The backyard was damp, the narrow alley slick with moisture—clear signs that it had rained during the night. Shiva remembered half-waking to the sound of rainfall tapping against the world beyond his window, then drifting back into sleep. He rose early, bathed, and stepped into the veranda with a cup of tea warming his hands. Nani was already there, seated on her low stool, laying out clothes for her bath. “Giridhar, won’t be coming today to deliver milk,” she said softly. “His son will be at home instead. Someone needs to go and collect it.” Shiva took a careful sip of the hot tea. “It’s still more than an hour before the school van comes,” Nani continued. “Finish your tea and go get the milk.” “Okay... I’ll go,” Shiva said, then hesitated. “But I

don't know where his house is." "It's near the Samaya Mata temple," she replied, adjusting her saree. "Just go there and ask anyone for Giridhar's house. They'll show you." "How much milk should I take?" he asked, sitting down on the sofa and picking up yesterday's newspaper from the side table. "Two liters, my son. Don't you remember?" she said, glancing at him while holding the freshly ironed saree. "Take the vessel—he'll measure it exactly. And tell him the milk has been thinner since last month." "Sure," Shiva nodded. "And don't drink just tea," she added firmly, concern slipping into her voice. "Take some namkeen from the almi-rah." She paused, looking at the saree again. "You ironed this nicely last night. See how smooth the edges are." A faint smile crossed her face. "If my legs hadn't failed me, I'd still be ironing everything myself—mine and your Nana's. Even back then, with that coal iron." "What are you worrying about while I'm here?" Shiva said lightly, smiling as he flipped the newspaper to the global news page. "I can iron all your clothes in an hour now. I'm much faster than when I started."

He got out as soon as he finished the tea. RCC roads had been laid throughout the village, but mud would still find its way during the rain. He crossed the main street and turned twice on narrower and narrower lanes. At one point he came across a cow being bound to a pole just adjacent to the narrow lane hardly a meter and half wide. Dung was all over the place. Rain had made everything worse, the cow probably moved over it and converted it in a thick slurry

spread all over mixed with mud. Shiva was in his slippers. He can't get through this he thought, dirt will stick through all his slipper and foot. He paused for a moment to look nearby for maybe a way around this. Someone must have crossed this mess before him, their trail should be there. While still, he was searching a man arrived from the other side, staring at Shiva from far while approaching. He just came and crossed through the mud with no issues. Shiva felt embarrassed. Probably he might be thinking of him as some kind of city brat with foolish tantrums, he thought to himself. Without paying much attention he walked straight through it all. Mix of mud and dung got all over his feet, even walking became difficult with those slippery slippers. But at last, passing all the hurdles he reached the temple mentioned by Nani. It was on the eastern edge of the village followed by the riverbed and farms stretching through the horizon after that. Small traces of water was visible in the distant probably riverbed has started to gain water.

Looking around, he saw women busy with cattle, some tending to cows, others herding goats. On a few porches, girls—about his age or younger—were crouched near mud hearths, preparing for the day's first meal. Thin streams of smoke already curled up from several houses, dissolving into the damp morning air. It felt different from his own home. They had a mud hearth too, but it was lit only on festivals; on ordinary days, the gas stove did the work. Here, everything ran on routine and necessity. Everyone moved with purpose, like parts of a well-worn machine, each absorbed in

their task. He didn't recognize a single face. A quiet hesitation crept through him. Whom should he ask? What if he was standing in the wrong part of the village altogether? The thought of asking for Giridhar—and being laughed at for not knowing his way around the very village he had grown up in—made his steps slow, his confidence thin.

“Aren't you Raghu's nephew?” a female voice came from behind. He turned sharply to see a woman holding a worn out plastic tub against her waist filled with cattle fodder. “Yes... I am.” he felt like seeing this woman for the first time in his life. But still somehow she recognizes him. “What are you doing here?” she asked politely while her gaze fell on the handled vessel in his hand. “So, you came for milk.” she continued. “Are you receiving milk from Giridhar?” she asked while pulling the sliding tub up on her waist. “Yes, I came for his house.” he replied with gratitude and gentleness. She pointed towards a group of houses barely fifty meters away saying “Go to that green house with the cow next to it. That's Giridhar's house.” “Okay... Okay aunty” he replied while continuing to drag his slippery slippers on the muddy lane.

He reached the house quickly. Two adult men were seated on a cot nearby. “You got quite late—but at least you came,” one of them remarked, stretching out his arm to take the vessel from Shiva's hand. “It's very muddy in the narrow lanes,” Shiva replied, offering it as a reasonable excuse. “Which way did you come from?” the man asked, a note of concern entering his voice. “Did you pass through the lane near Rambi-

hari's shop?" "Yes, that way," Shiva answered plainly. "You should've turned at the second cut from the main street. The road there is cleaner, fewer turns," the man said, then glanced toward a young girl wiping chairs on the veranda. "These goat herders have ruined that lane—nothing but filth all the way." Shiva stood quietly, unsure how to respond. "How much should I measure?" the girl asked, taking the vessel. "Two liters," the man replied. She carried it inside. "Sit," the man said, shifting to clear space on the cot. "Which class are you in?" "Seventh," Shiva replied, lowering himself slowly onto the edge. "Good. Study with dedication and hard work—you'll make all of us proud one day." Shiva offered a faint, uncertain smile. "My son studies too," the man continued, pride lighting his eyes. "Second class, MKS School. Very good at English. I don't understand a single word, but he reads fluently—or so it seems to me. The school isn't like your English-medium one, but I'm doing my best. I'll support him for as long as he wants to study." Shiva listened in silence, still as stone. The girl returned with the vessel filled with milk and handed it to him. Shiva stood up and said, sincerity softening his voice, "Alright, uncle. I'll come again sometime. I have to catch my school van." He walked away quietly, the weight of the conversation lingering long after the sound of his footsteps faded.

He returned home, placed the milk vessel in the kitchen. From there, he went straight to his room and changed into his school uniform. A few minutes later, he came back to the kitchen, quickly finished his breakfast, which Mami has

prepared, and slung his bag over his shoulders before stepping out into the veranda. Nani was lighting incense sticks for the morning prayer, her hands moving slowly as thin streams of smoke rose toward the sun. “Why don’t you take your lunch?” she asked, her voice carrying both care and firmness. “I’ve already had breakfast,” Shiva replied, edging toward the exit. “I don’t feel hungry in class anyway. And the lunch break is very short.” He was about to leave when her voice grew sharper. “Do you think I don’t know how school works just because I didn’t go one myself?” she said. “Children take lunch every day. You’ll only burn your blood with hunger. At least take some biscuits—I’ve kept them on the table.” Shiva stopped, turned back at once, picked up the packet of biscuits, and hurried out to the road again.

Within moments, the school van appeared and came to a halt beside him. He climbed into his usual back seat and stared out quietly as his home slowly disappeared behind the turning wheels.

Liminal

School had become the place Shiva waited for every day. It gave him an identity—topper, class monitor—and now, Gauri. He continued sitting on the second bench, directly behind her, and copying from her diary had quietly turned into a routine. “Hey... um...” he fumbled one day, hesitating long enough for both girls to turn toward him. “What was your name again?” he asked, cheeks warming. Both of them burst out laughing. “Gauri, you idiot,” Divya said, still chuckling. “How many times have you already asked?” “It just... slips from my head,” Shiva replied, tapping his forehead lightly. “Remember it properly this time,” Gauri said, a soft smile lifting her face. “If needed, write it a hundred times in a notebook—like kindergarten kids do to learn words.” That question had become his icebreaker ever since he’d started talking to her. “Sure,” he said, smiling back.

“I’ll write it someday and never forget. I promise.”

Small talk about diaries, homework, and the occasional quiz had slowly become his moments with her. Strands of her hair still escaped her neatly tied ponytails and brushed against his notebook, but now he no longer pulled it away. Instead, it brought a strange, quiet happiness to his chest. He felt closer than ever. If the world were to stop at that moment, he thought, he wouldn’t mind being fixed there for eternity. Then came the ominous day. The school administration suddenly decided that girls had to sit in their own row. The small world Shiva had built for himself—two benches, first and second—shattered at once. But what could he do? Fate, he felt, was not something you could argue with. The girls were assigned the last row farthest from the door, right in front of the podium. Gauri chose a middle seat beside Divya. Shiva moved to the second row. And after that, seats hardly mattered anymore. By every period, he could be found on a different bench, beside a different classmate—a quiet wanderer in the small world he still called his own.

One day, nearly half the class was on its feet as Mrs. Uma stood at the front for her Sanskrit period. She was an old lady—perhaps in her sixties—her age etched clearly into her wrinkled face and frail, dry frame. Her voice, however, was as strict as discipline itself. She had a fierce devotion to her subject, arriving punctually every day and working with unwavering dedication despite her age. That morning, she was asking students to recite Sanskrit verb forms, home-

work she had assigned earlier, while simultaneously checking notebooks where the same forms were to be written. Shiva had done neither. His pages were blank, and so was his mind. As Mrs. Uma advanced bench by bench, his heart sank. There was no time to both memorize those merciless verbs and write them down. In panic, his eyes searched the room and fell on Gauri, sitting calmly at a distant bench. Slowly, carefully, he slipped into the seat of the adjacent row near her. “Hey, Gauri,” he whispered urgently, “can you please write my copy?” She glanced at him. “Why? Haven’t you done it yourself?” “I forgot,” he admitted. “Please help me now—otherwise she’ll definitely beat me with those sticks, and the scolding will be even worse.” She sighed, half-mocking yet kind. “Okay. Pass the copy.” “Thanks,” he murmured, handing the notebook over through Divya with a nervous smile. Returning to his seat, Shiva borrowed a Sanskrit book from the bench ahead and began chanting the verbs aloud under his breath, like someone performing a desperate ritual. Mrs. Uma moved through the class like a slow tsunami—one stick for every wrong verb, five for an incomplete notebook. As she drew closer, his chanting grew faster, almost frantic. “Take this,” Gauri whispered suddenly, holding out his notebook. “Thanks—you just saved me at least five sticks,” he whispered back, forcing a smile, and resumed chanting as if warding off a dark spirit. At last, Mrs. Uma stopped before him. “Shiva, show me your copy and tell me the verb forms.” He handed over the notebook, stood up, and recited in the same steady chorus. She examined the

pages carefully, noting the neat, elegant Devanagari script, the beautifully curved letters. “Alright, sit down,” she said at last, closing the notebook and moving on. Shiva exhaled deeply. He was saved—and Gauri had saved him.

Then came the winters, and with them the midterm examinations. At the start of the academic year, each student had been given a workbook for every subject. Those books had remained untouched, their pages blank and pristine, forgotten at the bottom of schoolbags. Now, suddenly, the administration decided they must be put to use. Every workbook had to be completely filled. It was a ridiculous idea—one workbook per subject, each packed with pages. First, one had to search for the answers, and then painstakingly write them all down. Shiva got to work immediately. He finished his Mathematics workbook in just a couple of days. He was the first in the class to do so. Word spread quickly. One by one, classmates came to him asking for help, requesting to borrow the completed book. He handed it over to the one who came first, without much thought. Then Gauri came. “I heard you’ve completed the workbook?” she asked. “Yes, I did,” he replied, his voice tinged with pride. “Can you lend it to me for one day? I’ll complete mine at home today,” she said politely, her eyes filled with hope. Trouble. He had already given the book to a friend. He couldn’t ask for it back just for Gauri—what would they think of him, abandoning friends for a girl? No, he couldn’t do that. Yet he couldn’t turn Gauri away either. Their friendship, though small and new, meant the world to him.

“I don’t have it right now,” he said, the words heavy with anguish. “Oh, you already gave it to someone,” she replied, disappointment evident in her voice. He couldn’t let it end like that. She couldn’t struggle over something as simple as a workbook while he was there. “Why don’t you give your workbook to me?” he suggested. “I’ll fill it for you.” Her face lit up. “Really? You can do that for me?” she asked, smiling brightly. “Why not? I can do anything for you—” he said quickly, then corrected himself, “I mean, friends help each other, right?”

He took her workbook and completed it in a single day — finding answers, solving questions, writing everything neatly. When he returned it, he asked for her other subjects too, and she gave them to him without hesitation. He completed all of her workbooks, while his own remained blank. Only after finishing hers did he begin working on his own. Days passed—perhaps a whole week. He wrote late into the night, during free periods, even through running classes, racing against time to meet the deadline. One day, he approached her again. “Gauri, I’ve completed most of my workbooks. Only two are left—English and Social Science. I’m already writing the Social Science one. Can you please write the English workbook this Sunday? If it’s done, I’ll meet Monday’s deadline.” “I can’t, Shiva” she turned her eyes away continuing “I already have a lot of work to do at home,” she replied sharply, before hurrying back to her seat.

He stood alone in the corridor, the pale winter sunlight falling on his woollen blazer. His eyes followed her as she

walked back into the classroom, settling into her bench and talking to her friends. He remained there, silent and shaken, with the submission deadline drawing dangerously close.

Off Guard

Sun was dimly lit in those winters, surrendering the sky to cold gusts and a creeping fog, everyone in class seemed to notice the heat simmering inside Shiva. His gaze lingered too long, too often, and the obviousness of his interest in Gauri was hard to miss. Rajveer occasionally teased him, calling out her name, and Shiva would brush it off with a shy, blushing smile, though his heart raced all the same. Even the smallest interactions with her, brief and fleeting, lifted his spirits for days afterward.

One day, during arts class, he had sketched a portrait of her. Carefully capturing the glasses perched on her nose, the small scar on one cheek, the neat ponytails, every detail from memory, he had shown it to Divya to pass it along to Gauri. He didn't dare hand it to her himself. When the sketch finally drifted into her hands, his gaze fixed on her face,

searching for a reaction. Divya giggled as she handed it over, likely teasing Gauri. Hours of his previous night had gone into creating that sketch, and now he waited, breath held, for some sign—any sign—of appreciation. Gauri, however, cast only a brief glance at it before setting it aside, her expression neutral, unreadable. His hopes crumbled silently. Softly, he retrieved the sketchbook from Divya as she returned it, hiding the disappointment swelling inside him.

His mind was tangled in a strange, unresolved puzzle. Had he offended her? Was it too much? He drifted through the classroom, speaking to no one, lost in his own thoughts. When recess arrived, he stepped outside, letting the warm sunlight hit his face, but even there he couldn't escape the maze in his head. Finding a quiet corner in the playground, he sat alone, trying to make sense of it all.

When recess ended, he returned to class, only to see her at her desk, head bowed low on the bench. Was she crying? His chest tightened, sinking deeper than he thought possible. He wanted to approach her, to ask what had happened, but fear rooted him in place. The room felt colder than ever, the walls closing in, shrinking him into his seat.

Soon it was time for dance class—the one period they had each week that he genuinely looked forward to. He joined his friends as the class moved to the dance hall. He knew nothing about dancing, didn't even have the courage to perform a single step, but he enjoyed the lightness of the period, the freedom it brought. He settled in a corner at the back, paying no attention to the steps, his eyes constantly searching for

her, silently urging himself to go and ask what had happened.

The dance period ended, and still he hadn't seen her anywhere. Students filed back into the classroom, and he lingered near the taps, drinking water to delay returning. How could he tell her he was truly sorry? How could he promise he wouldn't draw her again? The empty corridor seemed to stretch endlessly before him. Only after a long while, when the corridor was completely deserted, did he finally turn toward the stairs and make his way back to class.

An unexpected scene unfolded as he reached the corridor outside his classroom. Several students were standing there, clustered near the door, unusually silent, all of them staring toward the entrance as if afraid to step inside. Something was clearly wrong. He moved closer and peered in through the doorway.

Ms. Sneha was in the classroom—as expected, it was the Social Science period—but she wasn't teaching. Her face was tight with anger, sharper than he had ever seen it. Gauri sat at her bench, her head lowered onto the desk, unmoving. Ms. Sneha was addressing the class in a raised voice, her words cutting through the room, though not all of them reached clearly into the corridor.

After a moment, her gaze shifted toward the doorway, where the boys stood frozen. She signaled them to come in. One by one, they entered the classroom, slow and cautious, forming a quiet line. Shiva joined them at the back, his steps hesitant, his eyes drawn once more to Gauri's bowed head.

“It has been more than ten minutes since the class began.

Do you people have any respect for time?” Ms. Sneha said, her voice sharp with anger, as she brought the stick down hard on the outstretched palm of the first student. He had already opened his hand, waiting for the inevitable. His face went pale, and his hand jerked back instantly, as if he had touched a naked electric wire.

She moved down the line without pause—two strikes for each student. The classroom was so silent that even a pencil dropping on the last bench would have echoed to the front.

So this is the day I get it too, Shiva thought, remembering how affectionate Ms. Sneha had always been toward him since the day she joined the school. His fingers, which had been tapping nervously against his thigh, slowly came to a halt. His eyes drifted away from the scene unfolding before him and fell on Gauri. She was still in the same position—head bowed, unmoving. Suddenly, the stick no longer mattered. The line shortened, one student after another stepping aside, until Shiva found himself standing right in front of her. Unexpectedly, Ms. Sneha placed the stick down on the podium beside her.

“I thought you were a good kid,” she said, her voice sharp and raised. “I never imagined you would do something like this.” Shiva felt something inside him collapse. Nothing made sense anymore. The entire class was staring at him—boys, girls, his friends, everyone. Yet he dared not speak a single word. He stood stiff, his legs trembling under his own weight. “There are people you think are sheep,” she continued, stepping aside and turning to face the class, “but

in reality, they are wolves hiding under a sheep's skin."

Shiva's eyes drifted to Gauri. She was still in the same position, unmoving, like a frozen rock. This was the first time he was being humiliated—publicly, mercilessly. How will I face any of them now? His thoughts raced wildly as Ms. Sneha's voice kept pouring over him. "This is the age to study and build your future," she went on, now sitting on the bench kept in front of the class, "not to indulge in such petty acts of love."

Now, slowly, painfully, Shiva began to understand why he was being punished. "And just because you are good at studies," her voice echoed, "does not make you Brahma. Life is long." Sweat broke across his forehead despite the winter chill — an irony too cruel to notice. He stood frozen, unable to move or speak, his thoughts crashing over one another, drowning him completely. He could hear his own heartbeat, loud and violent inside his chest. If only the ground would open and swallow me, he thought.

Gradually, even his thoughts grew so loud that he could no longer hear her words. His vision blurred, the classroom fading, as if he himself was no longer there.

The moment stretched until the bell rang. Ms. Sneha stood up, gathered her books, and walked out. Shiva moved slowly back to his seat without looking at anyone and sat down. He did not remember how he reached home that day.

Retort

“I didn’t expect this to happen,” Suraj said, breaking the strange silence that had settled over recess. The whole group had gathered around a single bench, unusually subdued. “Did you say something to her?” Aryan asked.

Shiva, weighed down by guilt and shame, couldn’t bring himself to answer. He kept his eyes lowered, fingers tracing invisible lines on the desk.

“You helped her every time,” Rajveer said, disgust sharp in his voice as his gaze flicked briefly toward the row where the girls sat. “And this is how she returned it. I told you—girls are no one’s friends. They only think about themselves. Always selfish.”

The words continued to fly around him, but Shiva barely followed them. He was still trapped in the memory of yesterday’s humiliation. Yet, amid the bitterness and anger,

the sympathy he was suddenly receiving softened something inside him. It didn't erase the shame—but it dulled its edge, if only a little.

“It doesn't matter,” Shiva said at last, breaking his own silence. “Let her think whatever she wants.” He paused, drawing a slow breath, as if convincing himself. “I'm doing well in studies. I can talk to people easily. And...” he hesitated for a second, then added quietly, “I don't even have an ugly face.” A strange calm settled over him as he finished, almost like relief. “If I ever wanted to,” he said, forcing a lightness into his voice, “I could talk to any girl.”

The bell rang, and everyone returned to their seats, leaving Shiva alone on the last bench with his thoughts. He sat like a statue through the next few periods, barely aware of the class unfolding in front of him. His attention drifted instead to the corridor, where the occasional passerby broke the stillness. Then his gaze settled on a pair of pigeons perched on the narrow ledge beyond the railing.

One of them would fly off now and then, returning with a twig clenched in its beak. The other waited, arranging each twig carefully into what could loosely be called a nest—a scattered, fragile pile. And every time the first pigeon returned, the other pecked at its feathers, impatient and insistent, until it flew off again. Shiva watched the quiet routine in silence, the small, relentless motions unfolding while the rest of the world seemed to move past him.

After school, he took his usual place in the van, settling into the back seat. His eyes stayed fixed on the familiar

stretch of road across the highway, waiting. As the van rolled forward and bicycles passed in steady rhythm, he caught that brief patch of distance where he always saw her.

She was there—as always—with the handkerchief held to her face. But this time, she didn't look up. Not even a passing glance. The moment slipped by quickly, swallowed by motion and noise.

He leaned back, a hollow settling inside him. His head felt strangely empty, and at times he couldn't even tell what he was supposed to feel anymore.

He spoke to no one at home, heading straight to his room. Without changing out of his school uniform, he lay down on the bed, his eyes drifting up to the ceiling fan as it turned endlessly above him. Was he supposed to prove his feelings to her? he wondered. Did she even know what he felt—or who he was to her at all? Thoughts flooded his mind all at once, crowding one another until none of them made complete sense. Slowly, a quieter realization settled in. Maybe giving was the only true form of love. Maybe one shouldn't expect anything in return.

Lying there, his gaze drifted toward the window, where the small razor blade rested—something he used for trimming his nails. The thought arrived suddenly, sharp and unwanted. For a moment, it scared him with its clarity.

He sat up at once, breath uneven, his heart pounding harder than before. A strange determination had flickered through him, only to dissolve just as quickly into something colder—fear, perhaps, or hesitation. He rubbed his forearms,

as if trying to wipe the thought away, then pulled his woollen blazer off and folded it beside him.

Sitting there with his sleeves rolled up, he stared at his hands for a long time.

Much later, he sat still on the bed, staring at his arm as if it no longer belonged to him. The letters he had carved burned into his vision even when he closed his eyes.

He lay back again, staring at the ceiling fan as it continued to turn—steady, indifferent, unchanged. He didn't know when his eyes finally closed, or when sleep took him.

A voice woke him, calling from the other side of the door. His eyes fell instinctively to his arm. Whatever he saw there made his chest tighten. He pulled his sleeve down quickly and got up to open the door.

"You're still in your school uniform," Mami said, standing in the doorway.

"Yeah," he replied with a tired yawn. "I was exhausted. Fell asleep as soon as I got home."

"Change and freshen up. Everyone's waiting for you for dinner," she said calmly.

"Okay. I'll come."

He changed quickly, choosing a long-sleeved shirt and a jacket, then rushed to the bathroom. Whatever had happened was his alone. He couldn't let anyone see it.

Masks