The coffee burns my tongue, but I don’t stop. It’s like when I choose to shower in the hottest setting possible despite my skin crying for help.

I like the rush.

The clink of the cup on the plate coincides with the door chime. I turn, and my mouth draws a long sigh. I return to my burning coffee.

When another twenty minutes pass, I’ve already downed two cups of coffee and a brownie. Before I get any more nauseated from sugar, I shove my sketchbooks in the bag and walk out. I have lost all hope for Ria to show up now and pick me up. I can’t afford to be any more late.

In this rental suit, I feel no less than a novice. I think of the time my father bought me my first artist kit, and the eleven-year-old me felt like Picasso. I can still feel that first stroke of paint on the sheet and how it splashed on my arm. I can still clearly see those tears well up in my mother's eyes when I dedicated that painting to her.

They haunt me even today.

Clouds rumble, threatening to drown me. I grimace, knowing it’ll ruin my work before it can ruin me. But when the rain comes pouring, I have nothing at my disposal but these sketchbooks to protect me. I race away and find shelter soon enough, only to cram between people to shield me from the downpour.

My heart almost leaps out of my chest when I feel something against my back. Realising it is only my phone ringing and not someone’s hands over me, I relax. The thunderous pounding over everything blocks out the voice on the call. I press the phone harder over my ear—*as if it is going to help*—and speak louder. Someone hisses beside me, but I ignore them and focus on Ria.

“Where the hell are you?” Ria whisper-shouts. Soft music is playing behind her, but I cannot fathom what it is over the noise on my side.

“No, where are *you?*” I shout to speak over the roaring rain. “I’ve been waiting for over an hour!”

Ria gasps. “That’s what I was forgetting! I’m sorry, Aarav, it completely slipped my mind.”

“So, you’re already at the gallery?”

“Yeah,” Ria says in a low voice.

“God!” I sigh. “Well, I’m stuck until the rain clears. There is no cab or anything available.”

“Dammit, it’s all my fault.”

“Forget about it now. Walk me through. What’s going on there?”

“Oh wait! I haven’t been inside yet. Buckle up, Mr. Aarav, you’re going to hear your first art piece exhibition commentary.”

I resist the urge to squeal and cringe at the same time.

“Ready?”

“Just go on already.”

Frankly, I am pretty darn excited about the whole exhibition. I’d been struggling to pay for my student loan and figured I’d auction off some of my stuff butit isn’t really that simple. And when you are rejected by a bunch of people in a row, your self-esteem takes a hard blow.

And being the salty individual I am, I don’t take rejection happily. I may act as though criticism helps me—and it does, actually—but my insides twist and my mouth sneers at the sight of it. The dire need for validation and approval has eaten me hollow from the inside all these years.

“It’s so beautiful from the start,” Ria gushes on the phone. “I can’t believe you got accepted at a place this grand.”

“Ouch?”

“Sorry,” she laughs. “Where is yours supposed to be?”

“Try checking the graphic painting section. You’ve seen it hundreds of times; you’ll know it when you see it.”

She hums, and I hear her rush. There is silence for a little while—as I assume—she searches for my painting. I cannot control the tingly feeling in my stomach anymore. It’s a foreign sensation that I’m not used to. Usually, I’m unsettled or embarrassed when I show my work to others, and now that it is going to be displayed for hundreds to see, I want to curl up and cry. From happiness or anxiety, I don’t know yet.

Optimism is relative to me. And for someone who has been defeated too many times, I get more obsessed each time. That led to where I am today.

The few vehicles that passed by before have stopped completely as the rain gets more violent. *How did it go from sunny to this within an hour?*

“Aarav?” I hear Ria in my ear again. “I can’t find it.”

“What do you mean? Look around. It’s a huge place.”

“I did…” There is hesitation in her voice. I feel something twisting my heart and rising up in my throat. My fingers tighten around the phone, but my whole body quivers.

“Then what, Ria?”

“Your name… I checked the list they displayed here. Your name is crossed out.”

I laugh. I don’t know why, but I thought it sounded funny.

“Aarav… Wow, it’s gonna sound weird, but I’m serious. Your name is crossed out in this section.”

I try to be calm. It’s not happening. *It can’t be happening now.*

“Check somewhere else. I dropped the canvas late last night, so I couldn’t meet the manager. Maybe there was a last-minute change.”

“Let me call you back?”

“No. No, let me stay.”

“Um… Are you sure?

“Yes, I’m sure, Ria,” I say firmly.

“Excuse me?” She says away from the phone.

There is no sign of the rain stopping. As more people squeeze in, the space becomes even more congested. Many have parked their cars on the side of the roads because even their wipers can’t work fast enough. The thumping of my heart with every passing second increases and matches the pounding of the rain.

*How can my name not be there? If they backed out, they should have the courtesy to tell me!*

While I wait for Ria to get confirmation, I can only stand here in *denial.* I'm disappointed, but somehow I'm not surprised. It's not like I've been super confident about my work lately.

My mother’s words echo with the splashes of rain. She told me to become a painter, and I did. She told me to be confident in myself, and I did. But she never got to tell me how messed up the real world actually was.

Quitting school to be a full-time artist was a regret I admitted a long time ago. I may be a decent artist, but I lose patience easily. As rejection comes, my love for painting fades bit by bit.

Each piece is retribution for my past failures.

When Ria comes back on call, I already know what it will be about.

“So, I just talked to the manager.” Her voice is breathless and angry. “He said his boss, the owner, did not… enjoy your painting. It was too—”

“It's okay, Ria, I can take it. Tell me the entire truth.”

Ria lets out a shaking breath. “He said it was too basic. It was more like a hobby painting than a professional piece. I'm sorry, Aarav. I yelled at him for pulling it out at the last moment but he wouldn't-”

I scoff. *Hobby?*

“Does he know how long I've worked on it? How many nights have I gone to bed and could only see that in my dreams? How many evenings have I wasted on it? Does he know how many people I have to prove wrong with this? Tell me, Ria. Did you tell him any of that?”

“I know you're *angry.*”

“Angry?!” I actually shout. “Why shouldn't I be? They rendered my biggest accomplishment, my biggest project, a mere hobby product!”

The rain has stopped. I'm right where I was twenty minutes ago. The sun is beginning to shine again, the cars are moving, and the streets are filled with people and post-rain happiness.

I'm the only one scowling while tears fall down my cheeks. *Why won't the rain stop?*

I want to go and shout at the manager. Sue them. Beg them. I've done *bargaining* before, though this time it'll be out of pure desperation. But my feet dare not move.

Being passionate about something you can’t make a career out of is a funny thing. You can put all your heart into it, put your soul to work, only for it to be disregarded as a ‘hobby’. And that? That hurts more than rejection.

"Can I talk to him?" I try my hardest not to let my voice break.

"Well, he kicked me out. So, no."

"Where is my canvas?"

Ria curses under her breath. I hate putting her through this. "I'll find it. I'll come over with it and lots of chocolates. Has the rain stopped?"

I look up again. The sky is clear as day, but everything is blurred by the tears in my eyes.

"No, it hasn't."

"Alright. I'll come pick you up. Send your location."

I hum and end the call. I drop my bag with my sketchbooks on the ground and crouch. The damned realization hits me harder than a bullet train. It's like my heart is being trampled by ironclad boots where my work should’ve bloomed flowers for me.

I realize how out of touch I am with my art. How I’ve treated it as a project to launder money so I can prove to my father that I was right about quitting school. How I’ve slowly begun to lose patience. How I could never feel inspired by anything anymore.

I realize how slowly I lost passion for my passion.

It is antagonizing enough to make someone ponder it, and now I’m living it. I was far happier and more devoted when I did art to live and not for living.

Does anyone who is ‘following’ their passion actually love what they do? Do they find those little rays of sunshine in rejection, unlike me? Are they not sick and tired of exercising the same routine? Does every human have the capability to do whatever they want without resenting it at some point?

Art brought me happiness. But it also took my peace and my sanity away. It was a price to pay, but I did not realize how huge that price was compared to the result it yielded for me.

I *accept* that I’m no longer the driven and sincere Aarav I was a few years ago. I accept that I’m lacking and that I cannot blame someone else for my fallout.

But how does someone recover from the fallout of their dreams? Will my eyes still light up when I come across my paintings and see my hands covered in traces of paint? If I leave right now, will this come back to me?

A part of me feels like I’m betraying myself, but another is relieved. If my mother was here to see a painting—I dedicated to her—get insulted like this, and get taken down, I probably would’ve never lived with myself. I don’t even know if I have the courage to pick up a paintbrush again.

But I hope I find myself back here someday and see my brimming reflection in the things that are slipping out of my hands right now. I hope one day I no longer feel guilty or resentful; instead, there will be contentment and pure love for what I do.

I’m losing a part of my soul today, washed away by this rain. I do not know when the sun will rise from the clouds for me, but I do know it won’t rain forever.

I see Ria approaching, and I’m still on the ground with my sketchbooks peeking out of my bag. But all I see is my passion seeking me out, asking me, and questioning me if I really, really want to leave it behind. I think I feel pity for myself. I think I feel sorry for myself.

"Aarav!"

I don't look at her. When my eyes can't even leave my love and my soul, how can I trust my heart to be ready to let it go? Because right now, all I feel are the smudges of colour on my fingertips. The smell of freshly opened paint.

All I see when I close my eyes are the cries of my unfinished creations.

"Hey." Ria is here now. “Ready to leave?"

I smile wider as another tear breaks the barrier. “Not really.”