

Fragments Before The Dust Settled

Stories of Love, Loss, and Longing

Lost Connection · Fragmented Memory · Buried Past

ANONYMOUS WHISPER

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~Dedication~

*To the one who walked beside me long before —
a soul once familiar, now buried in dust and silence.*

*Somewhere between forgetting and remembering,
your absence shaped the echo that led me here*

Your presence still moves like a shadow beside me..

*These pages are an offering —
for the bond that survived time, distance, and death itself.*

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Prolouge : Before The Dust Settle

They say it happened in 1038 — when the seas split open for the Chola ships, and their king, Rajendra, sent fire rolling across the Srivijaya empire. But that wasn't the only path taken.

One of those vessels didn't sail toward conquest — it slipped eastward, toward a kingdom that didn't resist, because it remembered something older than war.

Kampuchea.

That land didn't just receive us. It felt as if it had been waiting. The temples were not foreign. The faces were not strange. Even the silence there... felt like a name once spoken in another life.

They called it a diplomatic exchange — a gentle offering of friendship between two kings. But for those of us who walked that road, we knew it was something else. Not a mission — Not a march — A reckoning.

Something happened there — something never carved into stone, never sung in temples.

Something too sacred... or too shameful.

They tried to bury it like dust under stone, but not all of it stayed hidden.

It wasn't a king who remembered.

Not a warrior praised in ballads.

Just a trace — a shadow among iron, moving in rhythm with steps it had not taken in centuries.

The land did not feel foreign. The silence did not feel empty. It felt like a memory returning — not loud, not whole, just familiar enough to ache.

Whatever it was... it didn't belong to the present. But it found its way back — through dust, through breath, through things that should have forgotten.

And though no one speaks of it now, it still bleeds where no one is looking.

1. The Silence Between Facts

The world stood quiet. Only his thoughts moved — circling between yesterday's ghosts and tomorrow's light. The room was dim, the clock forgotten. He stared at nothing, yet his mind kept walking — forward and backward, through places: one that no longer existed, not anymore, and the other — moments yet to be born. His heart still carried the ache — the weight of what had been lost, and the quiet fear of losing again.

A few weeks ago, while searching for some urgent papers for his start-up plans, he had stumbled upon an old photo album — thirty, maybe forty black-and-white images taken more than three decades ago. He hadn't thought much of it then. But earlier this evening, somewhere between dusk and midnight, his mind demanded a pause, and laziness offered him an excuse — to open it again.

Among those fading photographs, one caught his breath — a picture of a small child and a dog. The child was him, barely four, smiling at something just outside the frame. The dog sat close, as if guarding that fleeting joy.

He remembered the day that bond ended — too young to understand what “gone” truly meant, yet old enough to feel the silence it left behind. Sometimes he still thought he heard the soft padding of paws in empty corridors, the quiet thump of a tail that would never wag again.

He slipped the photo out of the album and tucked it between the pages of a book. Perhaps he wanted it closer — not to preserve a memory, but to keep a small piece of what was once alive beside him, in stillness.

That night returned to him — clear as breath. He was standing in the garden of his old village house, the one he visited twice a year before it was sold. The air was still, and a full moon washed everything in silver. Grass glowed faintly, the trees whispered nothing. It was beautiful, and unbearable.

Somewhere near the edge of that light, two figures worked in silence, digging the small grave. He remembered the sound of metal striking earth — steady, final. The child watched, frozen between understanding and confusion, knowing only that something warm had gone cold forever. It was his dog — his companion through mornings of mud and afternoons of

laughter, the one who never needed words to understand him. Now the body lay wrapped in an old cloth, smaller than he remembered, and frighteningly still.

He didn't cry at first. The ache began inside, quiet and deep, as if something had broken where no one could reach. Too young to name it, too small to fight it, he simply stood beneath the moon — caught between accepting and falling apart. When the first handful of soil fell, he looked up toward the sky to see the full bright moon once again — not because he wanted to, but because he felt a connection to it, something wordless yet certain, as if the moon itself was holding what he couldn't.

He came back to the present from the soft pull of his childhood memories. For a while, he tried to stay still — to hold the moment in his hands, to stop the clock inside him before diving again into another current of time.

And then, for a moment that felt longer than time itself, the night around him began to shift. The garden faded. The air thickened, heavy with something ancient. The same moon hung above — brighter now, larger, as though it was drawing him into another age.

The world beneath that light was strange yet familiar, like a dream remembered too clearly. The earth smelled of ash and iron. Somewhere close, a warrior lay upon the ground.

The warrior's chest rose and fell with effort, each breath a fragile battle between staying and surrendering. His face was marked by dust and pain, but it was the corner of his lips that told the deeper story — of sorrow that no words could carry, and no silence could hide. It was the kind of pain that lived not only in the body, but in the memory of love, loss, and all that he still longed to say.

He was wounded — deeply, irreversibly. His breaths grew heavier, as though death itself had drawn close, reaching out a patient hand toward him. Yet he resisted, not out of fear, but out of a vow still unfulfilled.

There was something he had to do, something he had to say — before the darkness claimed him completely.

Even as his strength waned, his will refused to fade. His eyes searched the horizon, trembling with both agony and tenderness — as if seeking the

face he had carried his heart. He would not let go, not yet. Not until his last breath had found her name.

And when the final breath slipped from his lips, the light seemed to bend — wrapping around him like a farewell woven from heaven's own fabric.

The moon shone brighter, as though it knew whom it was guiding home. The earth held that fallen warrior close, cradling him with all its ancient warmth — as if to say, you have fought enough.

The wind moved gently, carrying no sound, only remembrance. Leaves trembled, rivers hushed, and even the stars seemed to bow in silence.

For now, nature itself was watching — a soul preparing to return.

He returned to his own time, the room slowly settling back around him. Yet the weight of what he had just felt clung to his chest like a second heartbeat. This was not the first time he had sensed the presence of that warrior in his memories. It was impossible to explain — harder still to make anyone believe — but deep inside he knew.

Somehow, in some way, that warrior was not a stranger. Either he had been that man once, long ago, or something greater was pressing the memory into him, asking to be seen, asking for justice. The thought unsettled him, but it also felt inevitable, as if his own life was a thread tied to a wound older than time.

He murmured to himself, almost without thinking from the mind but realizing from the heart — that as a child, it had always been hard to understand why something within him stirred whenever the moon hung full and silent above. It felt like a voice he could not hear, yet somehow understood. And each time that strange familiarity returned, he welcomed it — not with fear, but with a quiet acceptance, as if his soul remembered long before his mind could catch up.

The world, of course, knew him by a name, a profession, an identity that fit neatly into introductions and forms. Yet beneath all that, he had always felt another self, one that could not be explained by birth or education. That hidden self stretched far beyond this single lifetime — unbound, ancient, waiting to be recognized.

He could remember a fragment from childhood — an evening blurred by time, yet vivid in feeling. He must have been three, perhaps four, sitting in a room belonging to a familiar elder — one of the very men who had dug the grave for his dog. His mother sat beside him, speaking softly with the others, but his young mind was elsewhere. In his lap lay the memory of a wish — a bow and arrow he had begged for at a village fair. Even now, decades later, he could still feel the spark of that excitement, the way his tiny hands had trembled before touching those wooden toys, as though they were not playthings, but something he already knew.

It was strange how certain memories refused to fade. The toy bow, the faint smell of that small village room, the quiet glow of that evening — they remained untouched by time, while thousands of other moments vanished without a trace. Even as an adult, he still wondered why. Why did that emotion remain buried so deep within him? Why did the thrill of a simple bow — an object he had never truly known before — feel so familiar, as though it had once belonged to him long before childhood?

He remembered how he used to play alone in the garden with that simple bow and arrow, beneath the wide daylight sky. Most children feared loneliness, but for him, it was different — the solitude felt familiar, almost comforting, as though he were returning to a place his soul already knew. With each small arrow loosed into the air, he felt an echo in his chest, like muscle memory from a life he had never lived in this body.

Day after day, he would invent little battles no one else could see — enemies only he could name, victories only he could feel. There were no crowds, no companions, no applause. Just the grass beneath his feet, the sun on his skin, and an unseen certainty guiding his tiny hands. He didn't understand why the act of aiming at invisible horizons made him feel whole, but it did. Those moments were small and silly on the surface, yet something ancient pulsed beneath them, like an old rhythm returning in fragments.

Sometimes, when the arrow flew a perfect line, his young heart would leap — not with a child's simple joy, but with a quiet pride far too intense for his age. It was as if his soul was practicing, remembering, rehearsing a forgotten life in miniature. He was too young to question it, too innocent to analyze it. All he knew was that loneliness never frightened him; it embraced him like an old companion. In that silence, he felt less alone than he ever did among people.

It embraced him like an old companion. In that silence, he felt less alone than he ever did among people. Even as a child, he could aim and release those little arrows with a precision that made no sense for his age. No one had taught him — there were no lessons, no guidance, no demonstrations to follow — yet his hands moved with an instinct that felt older than his body. From a distance of five... sometimes even eight feet, he could strike the exact spot he chose. Not perfect, not extraordinary to an onlooker, perhaps a mere three out of ten by any real measure — but for a lonely village boy with a tiny wooden bow, it was strangely natural, almost remembered rather than learned.

Sometimes he wondered, even years later, how any of it made sense. Was it just childish play? Or muscle memory from a life the mind had forgotten, but the soul still remembered? How could a boy feel nostalgia for something he had never lived in this lifetime? How could solitude feel like home? The questions had no answers — yet the feeling never left him. Back then, none of this mystery mattered. The child simply aimed his wooden arrows at the horizon, smiling at a destiny he did not yet understand — a destiny that had crossed lifetimes to find him again.

As the years passed, that strange familiarity only deepened. Around the age of fourteen, he crafted new arrows from rolled newspaper, hardening the tips with small triangular scraps of Aluminum so they would look real. One afternoon, while testing his homemade bow alone, an arrow misfired and shot back toward him — striking just above his left eye. It missed the eyeball by a miracle, leaving behind a tiny scar that remained even decades later. Anyone else might have shaken with fear, but he hadn't. Instead, he felt a quiet, inexplicable calm, as though some ancient part of him whispered, It's alright. This pain is familiar. This path is not new.

But no one had ever seen it happen, and he never tried to tell anyone. Somehow, it felt deeper than a wound — as if the soul itself had remembered something the body merely marked. A warrior could have many scars, after all.

Still, the scar appeared one day — faint but deliberate — a mark he could never explain. Years later, when his parents finally noticed, he told the truth in a casual way. But somewhere inside, he knew better.

By sixteen or seventeen, the habit returned once more. He built another set of makeshift bows and arrows — not as fine as his earlier creations, more casual toys than real practice — yet somehow the instinct was still

sharp. Within just a few days of fooling around, he found he could strike a tiny one-and-a-half-inch circle from nearly sixteen feet away. The bow was weak, the arrows were clumsy, and the shots lacked precision — five, maybe five-and-a-half out of ten on a good day — but the feel of it was there. The rhythm. The familiarity. The strange, effortless sense of I've done this before. He laughed at his own obsession, unaware that he was sharpening skills he had never been taught in this lifetime.

He would think about it in adulthood sometimes — how a wound that should have terrified a child instead felt like recognition, not trauma. As if even danger, in that moment, wasn't happening for the first time... but merely again.

Even in those carefree afternoons with his bow and arrows, a strange restlessness lived beneath the laughter. It was the kind of feeling a child could never name—an emptiness that appeared only in moments of joy, the way a shadow appears only in light. He would shoot, smile, and celebrate... yet a quiet echo always remained, as though the game were only a fragment of something larger he could not remember.

Sometimes, after letting an arrow fly, he would pause without knowing why—staring at his own hands, turning his palm as though expecting some familiar weight that wasn't there. It made no sense, but the gesture returned again and again, like a memory rehearsing itself. He did not know what he was looking for, only that his fingers seemed to remember a shape his mind had long forgotten.

There were afternoons when he would stop playing altogether and stand still, the arrow hanging loosely from his fingers while the world around him thinned. The garden, the voices, even the warmth of the sun—all of it felt faint, as though painted scenery on a distant stage. For a few seconds, something within him waited, searching for a story that refused to be told.

Then the wind would shift, and the spell would break. The child would blink, lower his bow, and run again—laughing as though nothing had happened. Childhood never waits for answers. But somewhere in the rhythm of his running, the faint ache followed, silent and faithful, like a second shadow that moved when he moved.

He never spoke of it. He didn't know how. How does one explain a longing without a picture, a familiarity without a source? At times he

would close his eyes and feel the faint pressure of something once resting against his side—not the lightness of a toy, but the presence of something older, heavier, more real than the moment he lived in.

The sensation never frightened him. It was not the fear of ghosts but the recognition of an absence too old for his age. Sometimes he thought it was a dream returning in pieces; other times he felt it was the world remembering him back. Either way, he understood—without words—that his joy was never whole, that something invisible was missing from the picture of his world.

And so he kept playing. He kept smiling. He kept aiming at invisible destinies—while some deeper part of him, buried and patient, searched for the missing shape his hands were born remembering. He would grow up before he ever understood it, but even then, the memory would wait, quietly alive in the space between heartbeat and breath.

Yet even that quiet ache might have faded with childhood — **if not for the flash of two unfamiliar words** that struck his mind one afternoon like bursts of camera light. He was barely four, too young to understand the weight of names or the size of the world, and yet those words arrived uninvited, lodging themselves somewhere deeper than memory.

He found himself whispering them under his breath while playing alone in that garden — **not knowing their meaning, not knowing their origin**, repeating them as though they were some secret rhythm he never learned, yet somehow remembered. No one around him ever questioned it. Childhood loneliness has a way of going unnoticed, and while he needed a back, a presence, a witness—none arrived. **So his unconscious became his guardian**, watching over the boy when the world did not.

Day after day, he spoke the words in fragments, reshaping their sound with a child's tongue, unaware that he was guarding a gate to his own past. He never asked anyone what they meant. He never even thought to ask. It was as if the question itself was forbidden—as if some part of him already knew the answer, and feared remembering too soon.

At first, it was only a murmur — a child's voice drifting through the garden air. The syllables were uneven, reshaped by a small mouth that didn't yet know their weight. He sat there in the dust, tracing circles with

a stick, repeating the same two sounds again and again, as if testing their rhythm against the wind.

From a distance, anyone might have mistaken it for nonsense — the kind of babble children invent to fill their loneliness. But if one had listened closely, leaned in just a little nearer, the shape of the sounds would have begun to emerge.

“...Angkor... Wat...”

A pause.

Then, softer, as though he feared breaking something fragile —

“...Cambodia...”

The words hung there between breath and silence, strange and out of place, belonging neither to his age nor to the world around him. Yet the child kept repeating them, calm and unaware, as though the garden itself had whispered them first — and he was only giving them back to the air.

He didn't remember falling asleep, only waking to the pale light of morning filtering through the curtains. The album still lay open beside him, its pages breathing dust and time. For a long moment, he simply stared — not at the photographs, but at the space between them, the silent places where something unseen seemed to linger.

His mind replayed the words like a half-remembered tune.

Angkor Wat. Cambodia.

They felt impossibly distant, yet intimate — as though they had been waiting inside him all along, patient and unchanging, until he was ready to listen.

He ran his fingers across the edge of the photo — the one of the child and the dog — and felt again the same ache that had followed him through every lifetime of his solitude. There was no proof, no logic, nothing he could show to anyone. But somewhere beyond reason, he knew that his life had not begun where memory began.

The room was quiet again, but not empty. The silence felt alive, listening. He exhaled, closed the album, and placed it back in the wooden closet, beside folded workpapers and notebooks, — not to forget, but to

let it rest. Outside, the morning sun was rising, soft and gold, like a younger version of the same old moon.

By morning, his eyes burned with sleeplessness. He had wandered too long among memories that refused to fade. Even daylight felt unreal — thin, like a curtain stretched over dreams. He tried to rest, to anchor himself in the present, yet every sound, every flicker of sunlight, seemed to call him back. And somewhere within that call, slowly another memory began to rise.

He was two, perhaps three. Too young to remember the moment consciously, yet it lived on through the stories his parents told — how, one evening, when they went to the riverside, he suddenly began to hum a part of a famous song no one had taught him. The rhythm was slow, tender, touched with something almost mournful. The words, half-formed and fragile.

The parts of that song spoke of a river that once ran full, then suddenly fell silent — as if the lyrics themselves were asking: **If the river swells in the night, touching every shore, and then falls silent all at once — what does it mean, this sudden emptiness?**

His parents had laughed, but also felt a trace of amazement, assuming he must have heard it on the radio and connected it with the river they had come to visit. Yet when they asked where he'd learned it, he only shook his head, uncertain — as if the question itself didn't make sense.

The melody had come to him as breath does — uncalled, unowned. Even at that age, there was a stillness in his face they couldn't explain, a quiet concentration that didn't belong to a child. The tune lingered in the air long after he stopped, like waters of both rivers tracing the edges of memory and place before sinking back underground.

In their retelling, his parents said he sang it only once. Just once — then never again.

Yet the echo of that brief song seemed to follow him — not in sound, but in the quiet way memory sometimes hums beneath a life. He never spoke of it, not to his parents, not even in later years when fragments of the tune would surface faintly in his mind. Perhaps he didn't dare, or perhaps he simply chose to ignore it — the way one avoids looking too long at

something that feels both familiar and impossible. There was a sense, even then, that the moment carried a weight too large for words, as though naming it would break whatever fragile thread still connected him to it. So he let it fade in silence, pretending to forget, while somewhere beneath the noise of growing up, the melody kept breathing — soft, patient, waiting. Almost as if a quiet feeling within him was whispering to hold on for a while, until the truth began to reveal itself.

Sometimes, much later, he would try to understand the meaning behind that moment — though it felt like a puzzle within a puzzle. The words of that song, and their stillness, seemed both familiar and foreign, like reflections seen through moving water. It was as if the flow itself wanted to speak — not of something outside him, but of something within, running through unseen chambers, connecting what he remembered and what remembered him.

And now, as the morning light reached the edge of the table where the old album had rested hours ago, he felt that same quiet pull again — like a tide turning inside the body. Somewhere in the depths of memory, water stirred. It was not just the river calling this time, but the sound of memory itself — rising through him like distant waves remembering their shore.

The waves of memories circled back, over and over. The world outside glimmered pale and harmless, but inside him, the current still moved. It was leading him somewhere, he could feel it — toward water, toward silence, toward the edge of a name he almost remembered. The syllables lingered just beyond reach — untold words forming in the hush, waiting for the moment he'd finally dare to listen. And it seemed that if somehow he could, it would come not as sound, but as a movement beneath the surface — like a forgotten name carried downstream, waiting to be called again.

The current inside him slowed, yielding at last to the weight of sleeplessness. His body ached for rest. As he closed his eyes, the world folded into a soft blur — the memory of water trailing him into dreams.

He kept still, waiting, trying to hold the fading pulse of that call. But exhaustion was heavier than memory. The room blurred, thoughts dissolved into breath, and sleep came quietly, folding over him like water. Yet somewhere beneath that stillness, the heart kept moving — following the current, reaching for the place it still remembered as home.

It was sometime in October — the air mild, the light soft enough to forgive the city's edges. He had gone to the coast with his parents, a short trip that was meant to be nothing more than a change of scene. Visakhapatnam — Vizag, as everyone called it — was known for its clean, open beaches that stretched for miles, curving gently around the Bay of Bengal. The city rose and fell along the coast like a living rhythm — part hill, part shore, its mornings stitched with sea mist and the slow hum of fishing boats returning home. The sea had never called to him the way mountains did, yet there was something in the rhythm of those waves — quiet, unhurried — that felt easy to exist beside. The hotel was pleasant, the evenings calm, and for once the world seemed content to stay still. Even the sound of the water outside — constant yet distant — felt less like noise and more like a background thought that expected nothing in return.

The first few days were ordinary, perhaps two — he couldn't quite remember now. They spent them walking from one beach to another, tracing the long stretch of sand that connected each like unfinished thoughts. Ramakrishna Beach, Rushikonda, Yarada — each with its own temperament, its own color of silence. The sea

breeze carried the scent of salt and warmth, brushing lightly against the mind as much as the skin. And though he didn't care much for the ocean, he found himself watching it often — not with wonder, but with a kind of patient curiosity, as if waiting for it to reveal something he had once known. People came and went, leaving footprints that the tide erased almost instantly. He watched them — families, lovers, children chasing foam — and wondered how easily they could laugh beside something so vast. For him, the sea was not joy, but distance; not invitation, but reminder. Each wave arrived as if from another time, whispering in a language he almost understood, while the city behind him kept breathing in rhythm — unaware that somewhere, quietly, something within him had begun to listen.

He didn't feel any particular pull that evening — no strange echo or hidden meaning beneath the calm. Just the quiet rhythm of days passing without hurry. The sea wasn't speaking to him, and he wasn't trying to listen. Yet there was an ease in the air that made even stillness feel complete. The sky leaned softly toward the horizon, the waves folded themselves with quiet grace, and the wind moved just enough to remind him that the world was alive. He wasn't enchanted, but he wasn't bored

either. It was the kind of peace that asks for nothing — where thoughts lose their urgency, and the heart learns to rest without reason.

Still, beneath that simple calm, something unseen was arranging itself — as though the days were quietly preparing a stage for what was yet to come. The weather stayed gentle, the sunsets unreasonably kind, the nights carrying the faint perfume of salt and distant rain. Everything felt ordinary, but in a way that was too precise to be accidental. It was as if nature, without revealing its hand, was leading him toward something — not with signs or whispers, but through small, unnoticeable alignments. A slow preparation for surprises no one could expect, not even him.

He would later try to recall which day it was, but memory refused to arrange itself neatly. The trip, in his mind, had become one long stretch of sunlight and wind, all the days blending together like waves that forget their own beginnings. He only remembered that the air that afternoon was warm and strangely still — the kind of weather that feels paused, as if the world is waiting for something small but certain to happen.

Sometime between noon and the soft drift of after-afternoon light, he found himself walking alone along one of Vizag's quieter beaches. The tide was mild, curling lazily at his feet, leaving behind ribbons of foam that dissolved before he could follow them with his eyes. He wasn't thinking of anything — not the city, not the hotel, not even the end of the trip. It was just a walk, one of those unremarkable moments that usually disappear without a trace.

He had been walking slowly along the edge where the waves thinned into lace, his feet sinking lightly into the cool sand. The tide was gentle that afternoon, moving in small, unhurried pulses. Then, just as he turned to head back, a passing wave brushed over his ankles and left something beneath his foot — smooth, uneven, almost warm from the sun. He paused, bent down, and brushed away the wet sand.

Then he saw it. A seashell — larger than most, half-buried in the sand, its pale surface catching the light in a way that made it look almost alive. It wasn't perfect; one edge was cracked, the spiral slightly worn, but there was something about it that held his gaze. He crouched, lifted it carefully, and for a moment the air around him felt different — as if the sound of the waves had gone quieter, holding their breath. It was an ordinary shell, and yet, somehow, it wasn't.

For a while he simply stood there, the shell resting in his palm, its spiral cool against his skin. The sea stretched endlessly in front of him, and yet it felt as if everything — the water, the sky, even the faint noise of people behind — had slowed to a waiting stillness. The air changed; its texture became heavy, charged. He didn't know why, but something in that moment felt arranged — as though nature itself had been waiting, patient and exact, for this meeting to happen.

It was the strangest thing he had ever felt. Not fear, not wonder, but a quiet sense of being inside something that had already begun long ago. Even now, years later, no film or dream could match that sensation — the eerie precision of it, the feeling that the world was holding its breath around him. The shell was ordinary, yes, but it was also a key, a bridge — something placed there by the same rhythm that had once drawn him to rivers and nameless songs.

He lifted it slowly, turning it toward the light. The faint ridges caught the sun and shimmered with a fragile iridescence. And then, as he straightened his back, something inside him slipped — a sudden dissolve, like the border between waking and memory had melted away. He didn't fall, yet he wasn't standing anymore. The beach faded. The sound of the sea became distant, then rearranged itself into something older, deeper — like the echo of drums beneath water.

Images began to flicker. Not dreams exactly, but living fragments — vivid and ancient, each appearing and vanishing before his mind could hold them. He saw faces he had never known, landscapes that felt remembered rather than imagined. The air around him was thick with color and dust and the heat of another world. It wasn't hallucination — it was recognition, as if the shell had cracked open a door in time.

As the glitches deepened, he felt himself transported — not by body, but as if through some invisible passage, like slipping into a vivid simulation where every sense was awake. He wasn't watching it; he was inside it, though he knew his body was still standing on that quiet beach. Around him, a world unfolded — vast towers carved like prayers, stone faces watching over forests of gold. The air shimmered with incense and firelight, the hum of chants and the clang of distant metal. It was Kampuchea — not Cambodia as he knew it from books, but the older name, the living pulse before it became history. Even as he thought the word, it rang inside him with strange familiarity, like hearing one's own name whispered in a forgotten dialect.

The scene shifted again. The sound of drums turned to rhythm — a dance, perhaps a ritual. Men and women moved in slow, deliberate patterns, their hands tracing shapes that told stories older than language. Spears glinted, silk rippled, and in their eyes there was purpose — the same quiet devotion of those who build not for glory, but for remembrance. He understood, without words, that it was a play — the reenactment of a creation story, one tied to Angkor’s birth.

And yet, as quickly as it had appeared, the scene fractured. The dancers turned to soldiers; the rhythm became the chaos of battle. He saw a lone figure standing against a crowd, defiant, relentless — not with rage, but with sorrow. He couldn’t tell who they were, or why they fought, only that the grief of that moment felt personal, familiar in a way that made his chest tighten.

The flashes came faster now — images bleeding into one another like reflections on a stormed river. Everything trembling, alive, but unbearably distant. He wanted to look away, but he couldn’t. It was as though the memories weren’t his, yet he was responsible for remembering them.

Time lost meaning. The beach, the shell, the world he had come from — all of it seemed to fade into the pulse of another age. He didn’t hear the sea anymore; he heard chants, whispers, the slow heartbeat of something vast beneath the earth. For a moment he thought he might be drowning in memory, not water.

Then, just as suddenly, it ended. The images scattered like birds startled from sleep. The light of the real world returned — the sound of the tide, the salt in the air, the faint sting of wind on his face. He stood exactly where he had been, the shell still in his hand, though his heartbeat felt foreign, as if borrowed from someone else. The waves reached for his feet again, gentle, indifferent — as though nothing had happened at all. But he couldn’t move. For a long moment he simply stood there, his hand still half-open, the small seashell glinting faintly in his palm. The sun pressed against his back; the sound of the surf rose and fell, slow and unbothered. Yet inside him, something had shifted — not like a thought, but like the quiet collapse of distance. His eyes stung without warning. He didn’t know if it was from the light, the wind, or something older — something that had waited for years to be seen again.

He stayed there, rooted in that moment, while the world around him carried on — children shouting somewhere down the beach, a kite trembling above the water, the dull clatter of waves against rocks. But none of it reached him. Time felt folded, stretched thin, as if he had been gone for longer than a few minutes. The scenes he had just witnessed — the dancers, the towers, the falling dust — still flickered behind his eyes, half fading, half returning. It was not memory and not imagination; it was a feeling too complete to belong to either.

A tremor ran through him, not of fear but of recognition. The sea, the light, the breath in his throat — everything seemed threaded to something beyond explanation. He didn't understand what he had seen, but he knew it had waited for him — through centuries, perhaps through lifetimes — to be found again in this ordinary afternoon. The shell in his hand felt heavier than its weight, like an answer that carried its own silence.

And still he stood, tears gathering without reason, his shadow stretching beside him in the slow-turning light. Around him, the tide kept moving in its patient rhythm, smoothing away every footprint, every mark — except his. For a moment, it seemed even the sea had paused to listen.

He kept it with him for the rest of the trip, tucked inside his bag like a small secret. He had planned to take it home, though he never knew why. But just before they left Vizag, while his parents were packing, it broke — a clean fracture, sudden and irreparable. He didn't remember dropping it. It simply wasn't whole anymore. Later, he told himself it was nothing, just an object that hadn't survived travel. Still, even now, he sometimes thought of that shell — the way it had appeared, the way it had gone — and wondered if some things find us only long enough to remind us they were once alive. Perhaps it was meant to be that way, he would later think — that some things are never meant to be carried for a lifetime, only to arrive, reveal, and fade from existence once their reason is done.

A few days later, another strange rhythm waited for him — an echo from some ancient song he didn't know he still carried. It happened without plan or purpose. There had been nothing special about that day; the sun hung lazily, the air heavy with the same slow boredom that filled most afternoons of that trip. And yet, somewhere between distraction and coincidence, a horse appeared — tall, calm, eyes glinting like polished

stone. He didn't intend to ride it; it just appened, as though something — or someone — had arranged the moment for him.

His parents thought it would be fun, a small photo for the memory book. The horseman helped him climb, the leather reins cool beneath his fingers. He could feel the animal breathe, a quiet rhythm that seemed to sync with his own. Usually, the horsemen walk beside their horses, holding a short leash as a safeguard for uncertain riders. But after only a few steps, the man slowed. The horse moved smoothly, steady, untroubled. And in that quiet rhythm, something strange stirred — a familiarity he couldn't explain.

They say the truest bond is formed when the rider and the ride begin to move as a single being. As he sank deeper into that sensation, he understood it instinctively — the connection between a weapon and its warrior, each bound by unspoken respect. A warrior must honor what carries him forward, and in return, that force holds an ancient vow to protect him, even beyond reason. In that moment, though he was just an ordinary person on a borrowed horse, something within him shifted — as if he had become the rider of time itself, carried by nature's own memory from one century to another.

And from that rider's vision, it wasn't just balance. It was memory — not of this life, but of another. His body seemed to know the motion, the sway, the pulse beneath the skin of the world. Every muscle moved as though it had done this countless times before. The horseman must have sensed it too, for the horseman loosened the grip on the leash, letting the reins rest light between the rider's fingers. The path opened before them — a stretch of sand, sunlight, and something older, waiting just beyond sight.

He couldn't tell if the sensation lasted seconds or minutes, only that for a brief, impossible moment, he felt he was no longer himself. He was someone else — someone from long ago, riding through another landscape, carrying another purpose. The world flickered, the air shifting between now and then. And as the horse stepped onward, the rider's heart trembled with a quiet knowing: that maybe, through such small accidents, the past sometimes finds its way back — not to haunt, but to remind what still breathes beneath the skin of time.

When the ride was done, the horse slowed to a quiet halt near the shade of a small shack by the beach road. The air was thick with salt and dust,

the kind that glowed faintly in sunlight. He slid down carefully, his legs still carrying the faint tremor of the horse's rhythm. The horseman gave a brief nod, said something about getting food for the animal, and handed over the reins for a moment. It wasn't meant to be a task — more like a gesture of trust. The man disappeared into the line of stalls nearby, leaving him alone with the horse and the sound of waves breaking against the distant rocks.

He stood there, one hand resting lightly on the saddle, unsure of what to do with that sudden quiet. The horse breathed softly, a steady, living pulse against the lazy hum of the afternoon. He hadn't paid the man yet, but something about that silence made the exchange of money seem irrelevant. For those few minutes, it felt like he was there for a reason — as if being beside the animal wasn't a coincidence but a quiet request from something unseen. He waited, unhurried, watching the horse shift its weight, its tail flicking idly against the wind.

After a while, he noticed faint marks near the animal's back — thin wounds, old but still raw, hidden beneath the dull shine of its coat. A slow ache stirred in him, unreasoned but deep. He didn't think — his hand simply moved, brushing gently along the unhurt side of the wound, careful, quiet, almost apologetic. It's said that one should never touch an unfamiliar animal — especially a horse — without the handler near. Fear, instinct, even a flicker of panic can cause harm. But this one didn't flinch. It stood still, breathing evenly, its great dark eye turning slightly, as if to meet his.

Maybe it wasn't understanding, not in the way people define it. But something passed between them — something wordless, old, and kind. Perhaps it was the trust of one creature in another, or perhaps something larger, an echo of the same rhythm he had felt while riding. Some call it aura — that unspoken language beyond reason, where feeling travels faster than sound. He could feel warmth under his palm, steady and forgiving, as though the horse had recognized a memory that wasn't entirely his own.

He didn't know how long he stood there. Time, for once, had no edges. The noise of the market, the gulls, the waves — they all seemed to fold into the same breath. He only came back to himself when he heard a faint cough behind him. The horseman had returned, a paper packet of feed in one hand, a small, knowing smile in his eyes. The horseman must have

been watching for a while, quietly amused at the sight of this stranger who had found his way into the animal's calm without words.

He tried to hide his emotions, embarrassed, and handed the money over. The horseman nodded, still half-smiling — as if the moment itself carried an old, unspoken truth, one that needed no words, no explanation. Then the horseman turned away, busying himself with the feed. He stood for another second, looking once more at the horse — its breathing, its quiet acceptance — before finally walking back toward the hotel. The sea wind followed him for a while, carrying the faint scent of hay and salt, until it, too, faded into the ordinary rhythm of the day.

It was near the end of the Vizag trip when the sea finally showed a different face — one he had not expected, and yet somehow, somewhere inside, felt strangely familiar. He had always said the ocean didn't attract him the way mountains did. It was too open, too shifting, too loud for his quiet way of sensing the world. Yet the truth was more complicated: the sea didn't call him, but it recognized him, in a way words couldn't explain. There was a distant, ancient pull — not toward the water, but toward the memory of water, something only his soul seemed old enough to remember.

Vizag rests along the vast expanse of the Bay of Bengal, a part of the greater Indian Ocean — the ancient waterbody once spoken of in songs and stories as Ratnakara, the mine of jewels, the ocean filled with gems. And as he stood there at dusk, it felt as if those old metaphors were not exaggerations but memories carried by the waves themselves — shimmering truths hidden beneath shifting blue.

Vizag's shoreline was known for its restlessness. The waves were rarely still; most days they arrived with a firm push, rolling in with a strength that felt almost like intent. And in the evenings, that strength grew — as if the sea gathered the scattered light of the day and returned it in the form of waves. During the monsoon months, especially between October and December, the ocean changed again: louder, rougher, unrestrained. People often stood far from the edge then, watching the water with a mixture of awe and caution. Calm days were rare, and calm waves even rarer. That unpredictability was simply the nature of Vizag's coast.

It was a quiet afternoon, the kind where the sunlight softens rather than burns, and the sea feels almost companionable. He had gone into the water with his family, standing in that shallow stretch between the beach

and the deep, just before the sand disappears under the pull of the sea. Everyone else was laughing, distracted, pointing at distant waves that broke like pale lines on the horizon. And then, without warning, a medium wave struck him from the side. It wasn't violent, just sharp enough to knock him off balance, sending him stumbling into the sand before he could find his footing again.

As he tried to rise, brushing off the surprise, another wave came — much larger, heavier, the kind that forms without a sound and arrives like destiny. It lifted him before he even registered what was happening. One moment he was on his knees, reaching for the sand; the next he was submerged, suspended somewhere between the pull below and the force above. The family didn't see — they had no reason to turn, no hint of danger to alarm them. And for that brief moment, he realized he was alone with the sea.

He tried to feel the ground, but his feet found nothing. He was already rising, about a foot and a half above the sand, floating roughly a foot beneath the shifting surface of the wave. **Above him: air. Around him: water. Below him: emptiness.** It was a strange geometry — a place not meant for humans, a suspended space between the known and the unknown. He should have panicked. He should have fought. But instead, something inside him softened, as if an old memory had come to greet him through the water.

He recalled a line from an old Korean movie, one almost forgotten: that freedom, or moksha, comes when the body aligns itself between the earth and the wind — when one's existence balances between the material and the invisible. Yet here he was, aligned not with wind but with water, wrapped in something that felt like both a barrier and a doorway. Water is said to be the passage between the living world and the spiritual one, the border where souls cross and meanings deepen. And for a fleeting moment, he felt as though he had stumbled into that boundary — a trembling, sacred threshold.

There was no fear in him. Only the sensation of being held by something vast and wordless, as though the sea had paused just long enough to acknowledge him. The wave could have carried him deeper, could have stolen him quietly — yet even as it churned around him, he felt a strange, unshakable calm. A calm that didn't come from safety, but from recognition.

Even though the entire moment lasted no more than a minute in the real world, something inside him expanded far beyond the length of time. The world above continued as usual — voices, laughter, shifting waves — but inside the water, time loosened its grip.

Seconds stretched, deepened, opened. The mind that should have panicked instead became strangely alert, aware in a way it had never been. It was as though some hidden chamber inside him had been unlocked, releasing memories or instincts that didn't belong to ordinary consciousness. What he felt was not confusion, but revelation — sudden, quiet, wordless.

And in that suspended breath between fear and calm, he began to perceive the elements not as ideas he had learned, but as forces pressing directly against his body and spirit. It wasn't a thought — it was a realization, arriving all at once like light through a crack. Water wasn't just around him; it was speaking. Earth wasn't just beneath him; it was holding him. Air hovered above him like a waiting promise, and Fire burned inside him even without breath. Space wrapped around everything, a silent witness. In that brief immersion, in that strange stillness between drowning and awakening, he understood the five elements in a way one never could from books or stories — he felt them, as if each had turned its face toward him for the first time.

Water surrounded him first — cool, spiraling, insistent — a shifting world that had swallowed light and sound until only the pulse of its movement remained. It held him without hands, supporting and submerging him in the same breath, reminding him that water is not just an element but a memory: of origins, of wombs, of lifetimes that began before language ever formed. In that moment he felt not drowned, but recognized, as if water had momentarily remembered him from another time. Beneath him was Earth, unseen but unshaken, the solid body that held the ocean itself. Even though he was lifted above the sand, he could feel the pull of it — steady, ancient, unmoving. Earth carried the quiet authority of something that lives longer than gods or myths. It was the witness, the foundation, the stillness beneath chaos. And though he wasn't touching it physically, he felt it like a heartbeat: the reminder that everything which rises must return. Air hovered above him in thin, trembling layers, just beyond the reach of his rising bubbles. It pressed against the surface of the water like a second world, close enough to feel but too far to breathe. Even from beneath, he sensed it — the quiet stir of wind shifting across the waves, brushing the sea with invisible hands. Air

felt like a distant companion, the messenger hovering at the boundary of life, carrying warnings, blessings, and memories too light to sink yet too persistent to disappear. Fire existed inside him, not as flame but as life — the warm spark that flickered beneath fear. Even though water covered him, even though breath had left his body for a moment, something deeper, fiercer surged upward: the will to live, the pulse of existence itself. Fire was the unspoken defiance in his chest, the ember that refused to dim even when the sea swallowed everything else. And beyond them all was Space — the quiet element no one sees but everything lives within. It was in the pause between one heartbeat and the next, in the stillness beneath chaos, in the silence that wrapped the moment like a thin layer of eternity. Space was not empty; it held everything. It gathered the wave, the sand, the air, his drifting thoughts, and his awakening soul into one boundless, patient expanse.

Even as each element revealed itself to him — water holding, earth anchoring, air hovering, fire awakening, space enclosing — he felt something else rising beneath the experience: a quiet trembling, a widening awareness he couldn't control or resist. It wasn't fear. It wasn't awe. It was something more intimate, as if a forgotten part of him had been waiting for this exact moment to open its eyes. The world outside the water spun in its usual rhythm, unaware, unchanged, but inside him something profound had shifted. He felt as though he had brushed against the edge of a truth older than his own existence, a truth that had always been near but never touched until now.

That realization did not arrive with thunder or visions — it settled softly, like a long-lost memory returning to its rightful place. In that suspended moment, he understood that the elements weren't simply forces acting on his body; they were speaking directly to the part of him that lived beyond breath, beyond fear, beyond the limitations of flesh. And as he floated between life and the deep silence beneath it, he felt the boundaries between body, mind, and soul loosen — not breaking, not dissolving, but aligning, as though the entire universe had leaned closer for a heartbeat to whisper its nature to him.

As the realization took shape inside him, he realized the truth — Water is creation: it nurtures, heals, softens, gives life to every cell that breathes. But water is also destruction — it can erase cities, swallow shores, claim lives in a heartbeat. He felt both truths in that instant. The same wave that lifted him gently could have carried him into depths no human could return from. Water loved fiercely and punished quietly, always holding

both kindness and cruelty in the same tide. Earth is protector and destroyer alike. Its firmness is what supports roots, homes, memories, and human steps. Yet the same earth can crack open, bury, sink, swallow. It has the power to crumble or cradle, depending on its mood. Beneath the Vizag shoreline, he sensed that duality — the ground was calm, steady, but capable of a force greater than the waves themselves if ever awakened. Air is the softest of the elements, the breath that keeps life alive, the carrier of scents, secrets, and seasons. But air can also turn violent: storms, cyclones, winds that uproot forests and pull the ocean upward like a weapon. The wind around him was gentle, yet he could sense its dormant fury — a reminder that even the quietest forces hold unimaginable strength. Fire gives warmth, illumination, courage, and life-force. It burns inside every living being as hunger, will, passion. But it is also the swift destroyer — a single spark can erase entire worlds. The fire inside him in that moment was not destructive, but essential: the life within water, the breath within drowning, the spark that refused to be extinguished even when the ocean wrapped around him. Space is the most misunderstood of the elements — people believe it is emptiness, but it is the container of everything. It holds creation, destruction, silence, time, memory, and possibility. And yet, it too can destroy: for emptiness can isolate, can collapse upon itself, can erase meaning when stretched too far. In that moment between worlds, space felt like a cradle — but also like a border he was never meant to cross.

His mind caught the meaning of the elements — and in the same breath, a second truth opened wider, revealing their connections.

Water and Earth danced together around him — one pulling, one grounding. Water tried to lift him upward, to test him; Earth waited beneath with patience. Their bond shapes rivers, cliffs, beaches, and life itself. In his moment of suspension, he felt how they depended on each other: Water carries emotion; Earth carries memory. Together they held him between danger and safety. Water and Air are siblings — one moves freely, one carries the other's voice. As he floated, water pressed against his skin while air brushed against the parts of him still above the surface. Air carried his calmness; water carried his surrender. They worked together to erase fear, blending into a strange harmony where drowning and awakening touched fingertips. Fire and Air are inseparable — without air, fire dies; without fire, air loses warmth. Inside him, that balance awakened. His breath had paused, but the internal fire refused to fade, fed by something beyond physical oxygen. Air whispered at the edge of his senses, keeping the connection alive between the world above

and the spark within. Earth and Fire also share an ancient bond — one creates volcanoes, mountains, the molten heart of the planet. Fire shapes Earth; Earth restrains Fire. And inside him, that balance lived too: Earth gave him a place to return to; Fire gave him the strength to rise. Even submerged, he felt both — the grounding calm and the burning will that kept him from fear. And Space — the fifth — held all of it together. It allowed water to move, earth to exist, air to flow, fire to burn. Space gave room for the moment to stretch into something sacred. It wrapped him, the wave, the sand, the wind, and the life inside him into a single, suspended truth: that every element was speaking at once, not to his body, but to his mind and soul. And in that perfect alignment, his mind broke free from fear, opening the door for his soul to listen.

And in that brief breaking of fear, something else stirred — not in his mind, but in the quiet place beneath it. It wasn't a memory, not yet, but the outline of one... a possibility his soul seemed to recognize before he did. As if somewhere beyond the wave, beyond the moment, there existed another presence — someone like him, or once like him — waiting to be acknowledged. His mind didn't reject it, but it couldn't accept it either; it simply hovered there, fragile and unfinished, like a truth he wasn't ready to claim.

And when the water finally lowered him back toward the ground, letting him find the sand again, he carried with him the quiet understanding that he had just brushed against a deeper place — something he could sense but wasn't ready to enter. A part of him stepped back before he even realized it, as if his own mind knew he wasn't meant — or worthy — to cross that threshold yet.

That evening, the light fell softly across the shore — just as it always did — and the sea seemed to breathe with a quiet, deliberate rhythm. The waves weren't calm, yet they weren't in their usual restless mood either; they approached with a kind of muted strength, like a giant remembering how to whisper. There was a strange tenderness in their motion, a delicate insistence, as if the ocean was trying to reach him with the language of water — not to impress, not to frighten, but to remind. And somewhere between the wind and the foam, he felt an echo rise from within — like jewels hidden in the deep — treasures not meant for the eyes but for the soul.

And as he turned away from the shoreline, the wind carried the sound of the waves behind him — steady, powerful, indifferent —

like a voice that had spoken long before he arrived and would continue long after he left. He didn't understand it fully, but he knew the sea had given him something: not a message, not an answer, but a feeling that would return to him later, far from Vizag, when he least expected it.

As the sky dimmed and the salt hung in the air, he realized that not every connection needs an explanation. Some belong to the body, some to the soul, and some to the deep waters that hold stories no human language can speak. That evening at Vizag wasn't an awakening — it was a subtle recognition, a feeling that the sea had known him long before he had known himself. And perhaps, in the soft roar of the Indian Ocean, he heard not waves, but the faint shimmer of unseen jewels — calling him home, just for a moment.

Even then, even after all of it, a part of him still insisted he was bored of the sea. He had said it so many times in his life that it almost felt like a truth carved into stone. The sea didn't excite him, didn't thrill him the way it did for others who ran toward the waves with laughter. And yet, in moments like this — in the hush that follows an unexplained connection — he found himself questioning whether boredom was only a shield he had carried for years without noticing. Because beneath the surface of that indifference, something older stirred, something his mind didn't fully remember but his heart had never forgotten.

There was a quiet pull inside him, one that didn't resemble fascination or fear. It felt more like recognition — a subtle acknowledgment that the sea had been present in his story long before he ever stepped into it. Not the beaches, not the scenery, but the water itself. The eternal, shifting, remembering water. He couldn't explain it logically, but whenever he stood near the ocean, something in him loosened, as if a forgotten chapter was trying to rise to the surface. And sometimes, in those soft, almost imperceptible moments, he wondered whether some part of him had lived near such waters long before this lifetime.

The memories of Kampuchea lingered at the edge of this feeling — not clear, not defined, but shaped like impressions left by a dream just before waking. Strange actions, unexplainable instincts, small moments when his body seemed to recall something his conscious mind did not. They came without warning, like whispers from a far-off coastline he had never visited yet somehow knew. And each time, he felt the same quiet shift inside him — a sense that his life had brushed against the sea more deeply than he understood.

He tried to dismiss it for years, telling himself it was imagination, coincidence, or simply the mind playing tricks. But the heart has its own memory, its own way of threading lifetimes together. And the ocean, vast and untamed, has always been a keeper of such memories. Standing before it — whether in Vizag, or in a distant recollection of another land — he felt as though his soul leaned forward, listening to something beyond sound. Something that didn't need proof to be real.

He still claimed boredom with seas, laughing it off whenever anyone asked. But deep inside, he knew the truth was more complicated. The sea didn't need to excite him to claim him. It didn't need to dazzle him to leave its mark. Some connections are quiet, almost invisible, woven through lifetimes and carried silently across ages. And this one — between him and the shifting, ancient waters — was one of them. A connection that lived beneath the surface of everything, waiting patiently for the moments when he was still enough to feel it.

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2. Whispers That Followed

They began quietly, in ways easy to dismiss. At first, just a faint metallic clink — soft as bangles brushing against each other — though the room was empty. He told himself it was nothing, an echo of pipes, the settling of walls. But it returned again the next night. And again. Always between one and three in the morning, when silence was supposed to be complete.

It started in the middle of December, of that year when he was a second-semester college student, carrying books, deadlines, and distractions. The world wanted him busy. But the nights... the nights wanted him still.

For almost four years, the pattern never changed. Around the same hour, he would lie awake and feel it: a silence too heavy, as if someone else was breathing in the room with him. Sometimes, the faint clink came again — precise, unmistakable.

He tried to reason with it. Once, he even stood from his bed, searching for the sound's source. He measured the height where it seemed to hang in the air. Not at the floor, not above his head, but at the level of hands — as though someone were standing there, their wrists catching against each other. Bangles. The word pressed itself into his mind, even as the space remained empty.

At first, he dismissed it. But as nights turned into months, and months into years, the oddness grew heavier. He could no longer tell himself it was coincidence. There was something there — not a body, but the undeniable press of a presence just behind, watching, waiting.

Most nights, the sound went on as naturally as rainfall, steady and unbroken, like air moving through the room. But it wasn't random. Over time, he discovered it had a will of its own — a rhythm that shifted with him. The sounds grew sharper whenever he did something it seemed to dislike, as if the presence could object, even if it couldn't speak.

For the first few months, he obsessed over it, searching for reason. But as the years stretched, it became strangely normal — to lie awake and feel as though he was sharing the night with someone unseen. At first, he wasn't certain what it was. Not until another presence revealed itself.

This second one was different. Restless. Uneasy. While the first stayed rooted near his head, silent and watchful, the other moved — pacing the room, crossing the floor with steps he could not hear but somehow felt. A constant agitation, as though trapped in its own unfinished business. Most often, it would leave the room and wander the stairs outside, its motion so persistent it was impossible to mistake.

It was then he knew: the first presence was not the same as the second. One lingered like a soul who chose to stay. The other, like a ghost that had nowhere left to go.

For the first months, that second presence seemed bound — to his room, to the staircase outside, and only at certain hours of the night. But as time passed, the boundaries shifted. He began to sense it at different times, even in daylight or quiet evenings, and in different corners of the house.

Yet one thing remained constant: it showed itself only to him. If someone else entered the space, its movements stilled, as though it refused to be known by anyone else. Its presence was not always heavy. Sometimes it seemed almost playful, even helpful, as if trying to reach across the veil in its own way.

Once, he sat drinking a bottle of mango juice, the kind he loved. The opener slipped from his hand and disappeared beneath the bed. He knelt to retrieve it, but found nothing there. When he rose again, the opener was waiting on the table. No sound, no trick — just placed neatly, as if by invisible hands.

In those moments, the entity didn't feel like a threat. It felt like a child tugging at his sleeve, eager to remind him that it was there. Always there. But long before the sounds, before the nights filled with unseen company, there had been the dream.

He was still a school student then — a boy too young to carry such a vision, yet old enough never to forget it. An unknown young lady was there, sitting close beside his right foot, just above the knee. Her dress was simple, not royal, its fabric carrying earthy shades of light and dark brown. Nothing about her was adorned, except for the way her presence filled the space.

And her smile. It wasn't strange for its mystery, but for its familiarity — as if he had always known it, as if the end of a long search had suddenly arrived in that one expression. Her eyes seemed to say: I've found you at last.

The dream itself was simple, ordinary even. Yet that look — that smile — carved itself into him so sharply that it could never be forgotten.

And as the years passed, when the sounds began — the metallic clinks, the heavy silence near his head — his mind couldn't help but start stacking fragments, trying to line them into patterns until a picture began to take shape. Slowly, almost against his will, he wondered: could the faceless watcher and the girl in the dream be threads of the same presence all along?

It wasn't logical, not something reason could explain. Yet the similarities lingered — the same peace when he remembered the girl's eyes, the same quiet care in the unseen presence that stood near him in the night.

He was still not certain, but one day another similarity struck him. It wasn't in words, or even presence — it was in movement. The ghost and he shared the same style of walk. He realized it only after overhearing his parents once speaking about the way he moved. At first, he thought it might have been his astral self, some echo of his own spirit wandering.

It seemed to make sense at the time, because a few months earlier he had read in a book that sometimes the physical body can create out-of-body experiences like astral projection — producing what is called the astral self, a subtle counterpart to the body itself.

And yet, he found a clue. Whenever that astral self appeared in the presence of the watcher, the air shifted. The silence deepened into care, almost tender, as though a hidden bond existed between them — as though the girl from the dream and the invisible watcher were never two, but the same.

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3. Between Stone and Shadow

Sometimes places are not just ruins. They hold the weight of what once happened there — events too heavy for the earth to forget. Some memories sink deep into the soil, others cling to stone, waiting for someone who can still feel them.

He hadn't gone seeking visions. His eyes were only scrolling a phone screen, distracted, ordinary. Yet in that ordinary moment something cracked through — like a glitch in time.

It began with a sound: an unknown word, soft and faint yet loud enough to carry depth — holding care, fragile, almost playful. A voice, childish yet impossibly familiar. Though he couldn't understand what it meant, it didn't feel like a name being called, but felt like home calling. As if the past itself had hidden in the shadows, waiting to be found in a game of hide and seek he didn't know he was still playing.

Then came the shift. The air wasn't the present anymore. He saw — not with imagination, but with a memory his body seemed to remember before his mind could catch up. A hand, carefully, pressing against the white creamy pillar. His chest tightened. He could feel the muscle memory of that touch, even though the hand wasn't his. The weight, the smoothness, the certainty of contact — all of it surged into him like a rhythm long forgotten.

For a moment, it was like standing inside someone else's eyes. Watching through another's gaze, yet feeling it as his own. The vision wasn't blurred or dreamlike; it was sharp, conscious, undeniable. As though the stone itself had decided to lend him its silence, to let him remember what it had held for centuries.

Then, as he turned slightly to the right, he almost saw the one behind that unknown word — the figure of a young lady. Her appearance felt strangely familiar, though he couldn't place where from. She stood just behind the pillar, back pressed to the stone, face hidden, playful as a child who wanted to be found. Not a ghost, not an invention, but a presence — as though the place itself had reached across years to remind him of what it still held. And just as suddenly, it was gone — leaving only the echo of that touch, that voice, that glimpse of someone waiting where no one should have been.

It wasn't a dream. It wasn't imagination. It was recognition.

And with recognition came weight. His chest tightened, not from fear, but from a heaviness that felt older than himself. He knew — somehow — who she was. Not in name, not in reason, but in the pull of memory.

The feeling dragged him back to other nights, ones he had carried in silence. Those nights when, lying in bed, he felt a presence beside him — not in front, not in shadows across the room, but just behind his head. He never heard a breath, but sometimes a faint metallic sound, like bangles clinking softly in empty air. He had tried to see her many times, but there was never a form — only the undeniable sense of a consciousness, standing watch, observing him in silence. That consciousness never spoke in words, but still it felt as if that silence itself was a language — a quiet vigil, a communication no one else could see.

And then came the memory of the dream. The girl sitting near his right foot, just above the knee. Her face — so vivid it had burned itself into him. Her smile, soft but full of something searching. The kind of smile that spoke of finding what had been lost too long. And her eyes... those were what he could never forget. Eyes that didn't just look at him — they recognized him.

That smile, that presence, that vision — they were all threads of the same fabric. He was certain now.

That certainty didn't bring quiet — it brought a single word. The same unknown sound he had heard in the vision now circled in his mind, looping endlessly, like an invisible echo refusing to fade. It wasn't memory. It wasn't imagination. It was as if someone had pressed play on a hidden recording, whispering that word again and again. Dozens of times, in just a few minutes, until it felt less like a word and more like a call — waiting for him to understand.

He carried that word with him for days, chasing its meaning like a shadow he could never catch. It wasn't simple — the sound did not belong to the present. It felt older than ancient, worn thin by centuries, not the kind of syllable found in modern tongues. He suspected it was only a fragment of a larger phrase, broken by breath, blurred by the rush of running. Yet the memory was sharp, undeniable — too clear to be dismissed as imagination.

Eighteen days passed before the answer came. The word was real. More than real — it had once been spoken. And its weight was not ordinary. It wasn't a command or a cry. It was an expression, a release — carrying both joy and love, spoken from her to him. A fragment of affection sealed into sound, surviving centuries only to find him again. And yet, even wrapped in sorrow, he felt something stir — the faintest pulse of hope. Not for the world that knew him now, but for the self that had waited in silence, in vain, across centuries for her return.

The word would not let him go. Its echo pressed him toward search, toward origin. He learned that Pali had once been both a language and a vessel — a bridge between meaning and spirit, a tool for remembering. Perhaps this sound belonged to that lineage. He tried to learn, stumbling through scripts and lessons on glowing screens, but it resisted him. Pali did not bend easily to modern hands. The syllables felt heavier, older, layered in ways he could not grasp at once. Still, he refused to stop. If one path closed, he would find another. The word had crossed centuries to reach him — he would not let it vanish again.

But carrying the search alone was its own burden. Modern books spoke of kings and wars, yet never of the wounds left behind. They shut their doors to ordinary souls like him, like her — as if feelings were too small to matter. That silence cut deepest, a kind of betrayal. History had chosen to forget, and in doing so, it had abandoned them both. In those moments, when no answer seemed possible, his mind drifted back to her eyes. Large, dark, steady — the eyes from that dream, the ones that still held him. They didn't promise escape, only recognition, only that he was not mistaken in his waiting.

And sometimes, in the ache, he mocked himself. Everyone else ran toward dream-girls, chasing illusions of desire. But he — he was still running toward the girl of a dream. Because even if that girl had lived and died long ago, his feelings for her now burned past reason. He would die for her if that was the only way — but he knew death alone was not the key. If it took tearing through life and death itself, he would. It wasn't desire of the body, but something deeper — a pull from soul to soul, a connection that refused to loosen even after centuries. A vow that no distance, no silence, no ending could ever break.

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3. Currents Carry Unfinished Stories

Rivers do not remember the way we do. They do not cling to images or names; they carry only movement — fragments of what once lived, dissolved into motion. Yet some rivers hold more than water. They carry whispers that never learned to die, breaths that once belonged to someone and now drift like silt beneath the surface. Some waters carry more than their own weight — they hold whispers that never learned to die, breaths that drift like silt beneath the surface. Along their banks, certain stories refuse to stay buried, and the past does not settle even when the current does. Such a place waits — patient as time — for the one heart still tuned to its echo.

People say rivers cleanse, but some memories are too heavy to wash away. They sink, settle, and hide beneath layers of forgotten centuries. But the current knows them — the weight of an unfinished vow, the ache of a step not taken, the tremor of a name once spoken beside water. A river can carry the shadow of a moment long after history erases the bodies that lived it. And sometimes, when the world grows quiet enough, a ripple rises not from the wind... but from something remembering.

He felt it before he understood it — a pull that was not physical, not even emotional, but older than either. As if some ancient current — not quite remembered but unbearably familiar — had been waiting for him. As if it recognized him first. Something that moved with a steady pull yet lived like a shadow, lingering beneath forgotten years, waiting for him to feel it again. There was an essence in it — unmistakable, undeniable — yet without a name he could recall. As if something in its depth had been waiting for centuries for his breath to meet its surface again. The closer he walked, the more the air shifted, as though the past had exhaled after holding itself still for too long.

There was a festival in his city that season. During those days, the place felt unlike itself — alive in a way that blurred the boundary between the living and the unseen. Streets glowed with a warm, trembling light, as if every lantern and window were trying to hold back the early autumn darkness. Drums echoed through the nights, their rhythms so ancient they seemed less like music and more like memories waking from sleep. People moved in bright, flowing waves, wrapped in colors that burned softly against the evening air, carrying flowers, offerings, and hopes older than the festival itself.

Statues of the Mother — Goddess Durga, the Hindu goddess of strength and protection, fierce yet gentle, triumphant yet compassionate — rose everywhere, towering like temporary mountains carved from devotion and artistry. For those few days, she appeared in countless forms: as the warrior who slayed the demon king, as the compassionate mother of the universe, as the radiant goddess of the Hindu tradition whose arrival turns ordinary streets into sanctified spaces.

During Durga festival, the city seemed to breathe differently — fuller, heavier, alive with a reverence that even outsiders could feel without knowing the stories. Beneath the celebration — beneath the lights, the chants, the fragrance of incense drifting into the night — there was always a thin thread of mystery. A feeling that something ancient moved quietly beside the crowds, watching in silence, making sure the world still remembered what it once feared, loved, and worshipped.

The city was still wrapped in the afterglow of the festival. Lanterns hanging from balconies flickered like tired fireflies, and the air carried traces of incense, crushed flowers, and the fading hum of crowds that had filled the streets through the night. Durga Pujo always left behind a strange mixture of exhaustion and warmth — as if the entire city had exhaled after days of worship, noise, and celebration. Even the morning wind felt slower, softened by the echo of drums that had throbbed through its bones. The world was quieter now, but not empty — more like a body settling after a long heartbeat.

He woke earlier than usual that day, long before the city regained its rhythm. The house was quiet. It was the kind of silence that only Durga festival mornings carried — a hush before the drums began, before incense thickened the air, before hundreds of footsteps stitched life back into the streets. He had to go with his parents for a local trip on this festival, a slow mandap-to-mandap journey through light, colour, and something older—something that always felt as if it was watching from behind the glow of the goddess's eyes. But something in the air felt different, heavier with memory — a weight he noticed yet didn't bother to check.

Stepping outside, he found the streets washed clean; last night's colors and petals had been swept into corners, and the sky carried a soft grey-blue light. But beneath the ordinary quiet, something tugged at him — a pull that had nothing to do with emotion, memory, or even curiosity. It was older than everything he understood. A current without water. A

breath without lungs. As if some ancient essence recognized him first, long before he could recognize it back. He didn't realize it at first — couldn't have — but something had started following him. A current without water. A breath without lungs. A movement that left no shadow. As if some ancient essence had recognized him long before he was capable of recognizing it back.

The ads for that new drink — the one everyone had been talking about — kept popping up everywhere as he moved from one festival spot to another. Bright yellow posters, loudspeakers, even those temporary stalls — they were impossible to ignore. He'd heard about it before but never actually had the chance to try it, and a quiet curiosity tugged at him each time the name flashed by.

Suddenly, a memory surfaced — he had once visited a temple in Odisha, near a place with a similar-sounding name: Champa. The thought rose quietly, uninvited yet oddly familiar, lingering just long enough to make him pause before the flow of the crowd pulled him forward again.

At first, it was nothing more than a passing curiosity. Names float through a person's life constantly, most forgotten the moment they drift by. But this one clung to him, soft yet persistent, as though it had waited for years for the right moment to tug at his sleeve. He wondered, almost absentmindedly, where the name had come from.

So he did what anyone would do when a question suddenly grips the mind — he sought an answer from the net. Just a simple search, a harmless moment of curiosity. But the result, oddly enough, made him blink more than once: the name Champa, in many places, traced its roots back to the flower. A small, fragrant bloom shaping the identity of entire regions and forgotten kingdoms.

It felt funny at first, almost too simple to be true, like nature was cracking a joke in the middle of his busy day. Yet, beneath that fun, something deeper stirred — as if a veil had been lifted just an inch, revealing a line of connection he had never noticed before. Names, places, memories... all echoing the same flower.

That feeling — half amusement, half unease — pushed him to look further. If one Champa Nagar drew its name from the flower, what about the others scattered across old maps and buried histories? And why did

this name chase him suddenly, today of all days, through posters, crowds, and forgotten memory?

He began reading about Champa Nagar of Odisha, a region layered with local myths, temple paths, and ancient settlements that once thrived near forests of champa trees. Generations of priests, traders, and wandering saints had passed through its dusty lanes, each leaving behind fragments of stories tied to the fragrance of that golden bloom. In some accounts, the flower was sacred; in others, it marked boundaries of old estates, guiding travelers through dense groves. Even today, the name carried a quiet, devotional rhythm — part nature, part memory.

The more he read, the more one thing became clear: in Odisha, the name wasn't just a label. It was a tapestry. The flower wasn't merely a flower but a marker of time, season, ritual, and identity. A reminder of something soft surviving through centuries of hard histories.

Then his search stretched outward — far beyond Odisha's borders, into faded pages of Southeast Asian chronicles. Here too he found a Champa, but this was no town or village. This was an ancient kingdom — Champa of Southeast Asia, a civilization carved into stone temples, maritime trade routes, and centuries of cultural blending. And astonishingly, even this distant realm drew its name from the same flower, the same gentle bloom carried across oceans by travelers and migrants long before him.

He read about sailors who anchored by its shores, about poets who wrote verses comparing warriors to the flower's resilience, about monarchs whose emblems were shaped like its petals. The Champa Kingdom stood as a reminder of how a single natural symbol could travel through time, shaping identities of people separated by thousands of miles. Yet again, the flower linked the stories — a soft thread running from Odisha to the South China Sea.

By the time he finished tracing the two Champas — one rooted in the temple grounds of Odisha, the other echoing through the ruins of Southeast Asia — he felt a strange closeness to something he couldn't quite name. It was as if nature itself had nudged him toward this discovery, turning a moment of casual curiosity into a quiet revelation. A small thought, a small flower, yet carrying the weight of centuries... waiting patiently for someone to notice.

As he continued reading, something unusual began to happen inside him. At first it felt like plain curiosity — the kind anyone experiences while browsing one topic after another. But gradually, as the histories deepened and the connections grew stranger, he sensed a quiet shift within himself. His brain was busy reading the information from the net, yet his mind felt as though it was being spoken to. And beneath both, in a place he rarely acknowledged, his soul stirred with an old, wordless invitation — something it had been waiting for long before this day.

The more he read about the Champa Kingdom, the more the lines between memory and knowledge blurred. Champa, he discovered, had not existed in isolation. It was tied by trade, war, migration, and culture to another ancient name he had heard many times without ever truly understanding it — Kambuja, the land that would eventually evolve into modern Cambodia, or what old texts called Kampuchea. The names weren't just political labels; they carried stories of entire civilizations. And strangely, some parts of those stories felt... familiar.

He learned that the Champa Kingdom and the Khmer Empire (Kambuja) were not merely neighbors. They interacted for centuries — sometimes as allies, sometimes as rivals, often as cultural mirrors reflecting each other's strengths and beliefs. Champa influenced Khmer art, architecture, language, and even spiritual practices. The exchange flowed both ways. It was a dance of kingdoms, shifting across centuries like tidal currents — sometimes merging, sometimes colliding, sometimes disappearing only to reappear in new forms.

As he read this, he felt something tightening inside his chest — a strange emotional tug, as though these interactions were not just historical facts but fragments of a story he had once heard, perhaps even lived. His brain processed the data calmly, but his mind whispered, "Why does this feel known?" And his soul, silent for years, responded with a warmth he could not explain. It was as if each sentence he read pushed open a door that had been closed within him for lifetimes.

One detail struck him, not with surprise, but with a strange confirmation — as if he had already carried the knowledge without knowing when or how he learned it. The shared roots between the Champa Kingdom and the Khmer Empire felt oddly obvious to him, almost casual, even though it wasn't something an ordinary mind would assume. He wasn't startled to discover the familiar threads: the sweep of Sanskrit, the echoes of Hindu cosmology, the temples mirroring Mount Meru, the ancient cults

of Shiva and Vishnu crossing seas on the breath of travelers. Instead, what stirred him was a quiet understanding — the feeling that these were not isolated facts but missing links falling into place, fragments of a map he had been unconsciously carrying for far too long. It felt less like learning history and more like remembering something he had once walked through.

And at the center of that ancient world rose the one name he had known since school — Angkor Wat. He had seen its pictures in textbooks, memorized a few lines for exams, and carried a faint awareness of its scale and fame. Back then, the similarities between Indian temples and Southeast Asian ones had never bothered him; they were just facts, flat and ordinary, pieces of information his mind stored without emotion. But now, as he read again — older, quieter, standing on the edge of a feeling he couldn't yet name — something inside him shifted. Built in the 12th century, dedicated first to Vishnu and later embraced by Buddhist devotion, Angkor Wat no longer felt like a monument from his childhood lessons. Its central tower rising as Mount Meru, its galleries etched with gods and demons churning the ocean of immortality — all of it felt less like architecture and more like recognition. The temple he once knew only through pages suddenly carried weight, as though it wasn't a structure he was learning about, but a memory pressing softly from the inside.

There was another thing he remembered — something a Khmer friend had once told him in an online conversation: “Angkor Wat is alive. Not a monument. A soul.” At the time, he had smiled politely, thinking it was just cultural pride or poetic exaggeration. But now, as he read more, those words returned with a strange clarity. He lived nearly four and a half thousand miles away from the temple, separated by countries, borders, and centuries of forgotten history — yet something about that place felt unbearably close. It was absurd, impossible even, and yet the pull was real, quiet, persistent. As if the temple were a great magnet hidden beneath stone and jungle, and he — without knowing how or why — was the iron being drawn toward it. Not with force, but with familiarity. A recognition that lived in the spaces between thought and instinct, between what the mind learns and what the soul has never forgotten.

But the strangest part was this — the attraction hadn't begun today, or during his research. It had been there since he was a child, long before he even knew the name Angkor Wat. When he was three or four, his tongue

would try to speak it in distorted fragments, as if he were misremembering a word he had once used a lifetime ago. The ruined towers, stone corridors, lion guardians, lotus ponds — always stirred something in him, a quiet restlessness he couldn't explain. It felt like déjà vu without memory, familiarity without context. Back then, he ignored it, as children do. But now, reading all this, it was as if those scattered sensations from childhood were aligning, revealing themselves not as illusions... but as pieces of something he had once known.

As he wandered deeper into those searches — old maps, half-forgotten histories, the twin Champa Nagars of Odisha and the distant southeast — a subtle urgency rose inside him. Not curiosity. Not excitement. Something older. Something that felt like it had been waiting for him to look in the right direction.

And in that moment, another memory flickered back.

When he was a child, barely three or four, he had once begun humming a part of a famous song — a song no one had ever taught him. The words spoke of a river that swelled in the night, touching every shore, only to suddenly fall silent at dawn. A river that rose, breathed, and then vanished into a quiet emptiness.

Back then, it had seemed like nothing — just a strange moment his parents laughed at and forgot.

But now, while reading about distant kingdoms and vanished currents, those lyrics returned with a weight he couldn't explain...

as if the river in that song was not a metaphor,
but a memory.

He felt an urge rising again — the same strange, restless pull that had gripped him many times before. It was never a thought, never a clear direction, only a pressure beneath the ribs... as if something inside him was pushing upward, trying to surface. In the past, he had followed that feeling — searching books, maps, stories, ruins, anything that might give shape to the nameless question burning at the back of his mind. But every trail had dissolved into nothing. Every attempt had ended the same way: silence. A silence so deep it felt like standing before a locked door without a key.

But today, something was different.

Today, as he read through the histories of the two Champas — one washed by the Bay of Bengal, the other by the warm winds of ancient

Southeast Asia — the silence seemed thinner, as though something behind it had shifted. Suddenly, the words on the screen felt heavier, as if they carried breath instead of ink. It wasn't just information anymore; it felt like recognition. As if some buried presence inside him had finally stirred — not fully awake, but no longer sleeping.

He couldn't explain it, yet he felt it unmistakably: a kind of soft awakening, a tug between the mind and something deeper than mind. His brain processed facts, dates, dynasties, trade routes, cultural bridges — but his mind? His mind felt interrogated. As if something hidden was asking him: Do you remember? And his soul... his soul felt as though it had been waiting for this exact moment, this precise alignment, for far longer than he had been alive.

It wasn't excitement. It wasn't fear. It was a sensation closer to *déjà vu* — but heavier, slower, like returning to a place he had left centuries ago. Words he had never read before felt familiar. Names he should not have known rang with the faint ache of recognition. Even the photographs — temple pillars, weathered sandstone, eroded carvings — struck him with the strange clarity of old memories resurfacing through fog.

— but today, for the first time, they did not disappear. Instead, they grew clearer. The more he read, the stronger the invitation felt — as if someone behind all these fragments was guiding his attention gently but unmistakably. It wasn't loud. It wasn't dramatic. It was quiet, like the soft touch of a hand on the shoulder. A pull that said: Look again. You missed something last time. And for once, he did not resist it. He let the feeling lead him deeper.

He returned to the river-song memory, letting it breathe inside him. Back then, he had not understood why a child would hum a song about a river rising and then falling silent. He had always believed his childhood self had sung that song the way children often do — a random tune, an innocent echo of something heard somewhere. His parents had believed the same. They assumed it was just one of those curious moments toddlers have, where they mimic things without knowing why. Nothing more, nothing mystical. But now, with everything he had been reading and piecing together, that simple explanation no longer felt complete. Something in that moment — that small scene from a life so early it barely belonged to memory — felt too deliberate, too deep, too strangely familiar to dismiss as random. It was as if the child he had been wasn't mimicking at all. but remembering.

And now, the deeper he tried to reach... that image carried another meaning. A river that swells overnight, touches every shore, and then empties — it felt metaphorical, symbolic, almost ritualistic. As if the lyrics were not describing water, but a life. A rise. A fall. A disappearance. A rebirth. Something inside him trembled at the thought.

Maybe the song had not come from the present at all. Maybe it had arrived from somewhere deeper — a place where memory behaves like water: shifting, retreating, returning when least expected. That childhood hum, that random moment everyone dismissed... perhaps it had been the first crack in the wall. The first sign that something was trying to speak through him long before he had the language to understand it.

Now, decades later, the cracks were widening. The clues were aligning. The names — Champa, Kambuja, the vanished kingdoms, the fracturing of time between them — were no longer disconnected. They were strands of a web tightening around him, drawing him closer to something he had once lived, once known, once lost. The old silence was breaking, not loudly, but with a slow inevitability that made his breath deepen.

And as he sat there, trying to remember, feeling that old pulse rise inside him — a name surfaced from somewhere far deeper than logic: Mekong. It came with no explanation, no memory attached to it, only a strange certainty... as if the river itself had been part of a story he had once lived.

What surprised him most was how his heart accepted the name. Calmly. Quietly. As if it had been waiting for years to return. His mind, however, reacted differently — a sudden mixture of excitement and tension, like a wire pulled tight. A part of him wanted to rush to the internet, search maps, old dynasties, river routes, anything that might confirm this sudden echo. But another part, older and deeper, urged him to stop.

He realized he was exhausted — not just mentally, after hours of reading and connecting strange dots, but emotionally too. Something about the name had shaken him, had drawn energy straight out of him. His body felt heavy, drained; his breath came slow. He leaned back, eyes closed, letting the weight settle. Whatever this was, it wasn't something he could chase with a quick search.

So he let the urge fade. He turned off the screen, stood up, and told himself the simplest truth he could: Enough for today. But the day, as he

would soon learn, was not finished with him. Sometimes nature waits for the exact moment when a person is too tired to resist — to reveal what it needs to reveal.

Later that day, he was returning home from the Durga festival with his family. The roads were lined with lights, loudspeakers, laughter, people moving like tides. The car rolled steadily past familiar lanes, heavy with incense and dust. He wasn't thinking about anything in particular — not Mekong, not temples, not childhood memories. Just letting his mind drift.

But then, about two kilometers before their home, the car slowed and stopped. A small community had set up a temporary festival structure — not a grand pavilion like the others they had visited earlier, but a simple one. It was just a local festival canopy, nothing more. To most people, it looked ordinary, almost forgettable: a cloth-covered frame, a few lights, some decorations done with love but limited resources.

Yet the moment he stepped outside, something shifted again. The place, though simple, seemed wrapped in a quiet energy. A handful of small trees stood near the road, their branches trembling gently in the night wind. Grass brushed softly against the earth, and the air smelled of soil that had recently been touched by rain. Nothing unusual — yet everything felt significant.

From other people's eyes, it was just a normal roadside setup. But through his eyes, the surroundings arranged themselves into something else — something ancient, deliberate. He felt as if the natural world around that canopy was aligning, responding, forming an unseen circle. A silent presence in the air stirred, subtle but quietly known.

He could sense the five elements there — earth beneath his feet, air whispering through leaves, fire glowing faintly in lamps, water resting in the humidity of night, and space holding everything together. Not as symbols, not as imagination, but in their purest forms, each carrying its own quiet consciousness.

And he realized something: these elements only showed themselves like this to those who dared to see, to those who were already standing at the edge of some forgotten truth. A strange calm rose inside him, mingled with the memory of the name that had surfaced earlier. Mekong. River. Memory. Call. It felt as if nature itself had begun to turn the next page of

a story he had never learned to read — a story it had waited years to reveal. And in the quiet between breath and thought, he sensed that nature was asking him only one thing: whether he was finally ready to face it.

He hesitated. His body was tired, his mind worn thin from the weight of everything that had risen inside him that day. A part of him wanted to retreat, to go home, to lie down and forget this strange stirring in his chest. But another part — deeper, quieter, older than exhaustion — held him still. It wasn't curiosity. It wasn't imagination. It felt like the gentle pull of something that had been waiting beneath his life for years, now finally asking him to step closer.

Maybe his heart knew this before he did. Maybe his soul recognized what his conscious mind was only beginning to understand. As he stood there, surrounded by the hum of light and the whisper of leaves, he felt a quietly undeniable sensation rising again — the same sensation he had felt as a child without knowing its name. A tremble within the subconscious, a shift in the fabric of awareness, a doorway nudging open inside him. Something was calling, and some buried instinct within him knew that turning away now would only delay the inevitable.

So despite the fatigue settling into his bones, he allowed himself one more step, one more breath, one more moment of surrender to the strange energy that wrapped around that place. He let the feeling move through him — the faint warmth, the quiet hum, the sense of something ancient brushing lightly against the edges of his consciousness. He didn't try to define it. He didn't try to fight it. He simply let himself feel it, knowing that whatever this was, it was something that would change the meaning of everything he had ever known, everything he had ever lived.

Something shifted the moment he stopped resisting. It was subtle at first — like a faint tremor beneath the skin, a murmur inside the bones. As he let nature take him, the noise of the world faded, not suddenly, but the way light dims before dawn: softly, deliberately, as if preparing him for something older than memory. He could feel his mind loosening its grip on its usual thoughts, as though the boundaries between thinking and feeling were dissolving grain by grain.

The air around him thickened, yet he breathed more easily than ever. The rustling of leaves came to him not as sound, but as intention. The slow push of the wind felt like a whisper that had travelled too far to turn

back. In that moment, his mind — usually sharp, restless, always questioning — quieted, letting some deeper rhythm rise in its place. It wasn't peace exactly. It was recognition.

And underneath that recognition, something else pressed upward: a presence that felt like it had been waiting for centuries just beyond the edge of awareness, patient enough to wait, powerful enough to not be ignored any longer. The first stirring of an awakening he did not yet understand... but already feared and trusted at the same time.

His mind reached inward, searching for logic, but logic was no longer the language of what was happening. A slow, deliberate warmth rose from his chest — not his heartbeat, but something behind it. It felt as though the heart had begun speaking in pulses, in waves that did not travel through arteries but through space itself.

The warmth traveled upward, toward his thoughts, and downward, toward his core. And suddenly, the two were not separate. Mind and heart found each other in the middle like two lights converging, like two halves of a memory he didn't know he'd lost. In that merging, he felt something open — a door that wasn't physical, yet its presence was undeniable.

With each breath, he sensed things rearranging inside him. A quiet truth rising. A forgotten grief shifting. A longing stretching its wings after a lifetime of silence. The world outside seemed to dim and sharpen at once; the edges of every object glowed faintly, as if wrapped in a veil of meaning he had never learned to see.

And deep within that luminous quiet, he sensed it: his heart turning toward something, as if he had finally found a bridge already built within him — mind to heart, heart to soul.

There are moments in life when the self breaks open — not in pain, but in revelation. This was one of them.

The moment the heart connected fully, something within him unlocked, like an ancient door unbolting after ages of darkness. A sensation rose from the depths of his being — not memory, not emotion, but something older, purer. As though the soul, long dormant, finally exhaled.

He felt weightless and heavy at the same time, as if some other lifetime he had once lived pressed gently against the edges of his awareness. The

air seemed to tremble around him, faintly vibrating with a presence he couldn't name. Every leaf, every shadow, every flicker of passing light felt sharpened, attuned — as though the world itself recognized him in a way he had yet to recognize himself. A current — invisible, silent, and undeniable — moved through him, a thread binding him to something vast and immense, something almost terrifying in its closeness.

And then came the feeling that stole his breath: A pull from far away, older than cities, older than names — a river-deep calling that felt like a reunion. His soul didn't react with shock. It reacted with relief. As though this was the moment it had been waiting for across lifetimes, across deaths, across worlds.

A strange stillness settled inside him — not empty, but steady, like the moment after a storm when the air finally remembers how to breathe. Heart and soul no longer felt like two different chambers; they moved together, pulsing in the same ancient rhythm. And as that alignment deepened, something hidden within him began to shift. The fog he had carried all his life — the quiet, stubborn darkness that had kept certain memories sealed away — started thinning. Not in a dramatic flash, but the way mist dissolves when sunlight touches it. Softly. Reluctantly. Inevitably. It felt as though someone had turned a key inside his mind, and a locked corridor he had never dared to enter was slowly opening itself.

From that corridor, something began to rise — not an image, not yet a memory, but a resonance. A faint hum, like the echo of a sound spoken in another lifetime. It brushed against his ears with the gentleness of a faraway chant carried by the wind. He couldn't place it, couldn't decode it, yet the moment he heard it, a part of him responded with aching familiarity. The sound didn't feel new; it felt returned. As though the past, long muted, had finally decided to reveal its notes. And in that trembling moment, he realized that what was coming toward him wasn't just a memory... but a truth that had been searching for him just as desperately as he had been searching for it.

When the fog inside him finally thinned just enough, the world behind his eyelids began to shift. Not into clarity, but into a shape — a moment from a time that wasn't this one, yet felt impossibly near. He couldn't see anything with his eyes, but his heart sensed it before thought could intervene: he was standing in a place where many people moved around him. A gathering. A celebration. A moment alive with voices and

warmth. But the scene remained made of dust and shadow, still half-buried in darkness. Figures moved like drifting grains of sand caught between faint light and faint gloom, and he could only feel them, not decipher them. Still... he knew he had stood there once. He knew he belonged to that crowd.

Within that blurred gathering, something sharper pulsed — the undeniable presence of someone precious. He couldn't see her face, Though she was saying something — he couldn't understand her words. Yet his mind echoed with laughter that didn't belong to this lifetime. It came from somewhere deeper: from heart-memory, from soul-memory. The sound felt warm enough to calm him and painful enough to pierce him, as if every note carried both joy and an ancient grief. His heart tightened with recognition, while his mind trembled with questions. And his soul — that silent witness — responded not with surprise but with exhaustion, as if it had carried this story alone for centuries, waiting for the moment it could finally rise again.

The haze thickened around the figures, but one presence shone through it like a whispered truth he had always known: a girl. Not the “him” of today — the other him, the one who had lived long before — felt her beside him. Even in the dust-filled shadows, he could sense her warmth, her gentle shyness, her quiet happiness whenever she stood close. The connection wasn't dramatic; it was natural, effortless, as if their souls had once moved around each other like two halves of a forgotten circle. Every emotion came at once — attraction, comfort, longing — weaving together like the threads of a life he had lived but somehow lost.

And within that memory, he felt the river. Not as water, not as a landscape, but as a living pulse. The Mekong. Its ancient currents carried the scent of gatherings, the sound of distant chants, the rhythm of celebrations that mirrored the festival happening around him in his present life. He felt himself standing by its bank as another version of him watched over the girl — not because it was his duty, but because nature had chosen him. The bond felt sacred, quiet, instinctive. He wasn't her guardian by role; he was her guardian by heart. Protecting her without being seen, caring without needing recognition. In that forgotten life, he had been the eyes, and she... she had been the heart.

But intertwined with that tenderness was a wound so old it still trembled in him. A sorrow he couldn't fully remember and a separation he couldn't fully forget. The pain felt like the tearing of something meant to

stay together — like the river kept flowing, but the shore it loved was pulled away. He felt, without knowing the details, that he had lost her once. Not by choice. Not by distance. But by fate. And the grief of that loss had pressed so heavily upon his soul that it had shut itself down, gone quiet, fallen into a long sleep. Now, as these fragments rose again, he understood: the soul had always known every truth, every connection, every wound... it had simply been too broken to speak.

The haze around him shifted again, not clearing completely but thinning in places, as if light was trying to press through its cracks. What had been only silhouettes now hinted at form — not yet faces, not yet names, but movements that carried intention. The crowd wasn't just a gathering anymore; it was a celebration, something sacred, something tied to ritual. Faint pulses of drums reached him from somewhere inside the memory, their rhythm different from the festival he had just attended, yet somehow part of the same ancient heartbeat. The sound didn't feel like music. It felt like time trying to speak to him in a language he once knew.

Slowly, colors began to seep into the dust — not clear colors, but impressions. Warm golds. Deep reds. Flickers of torchlight that danced on the river's surface. He could sense offerings being carried, prayers being whispered, and a quiet reverence that belonged to a culture he had never studied but somehow understood. The memory didn't show him details; it allowed him to feel them. As if it was trying to wake him gently, petal by petal, instead of overwhelming him with the full bloom of truth.

The river appeared next — first as a glimmer, then as a presence. The Mekong wasn't a place in the memory; it was a living companion. Its currents glowed faintly, carrying reflections that didn't follow the logic of sight. They swirled like fragments of forgotten light, as if the river itself was remembering something along with him. He felt the breeze that came off its surface — warm, humid, carrying the breath of a land older than anything he had ever touched in this present life. And with it came a faint tremor of anticipation, like the river was waiting for him to remember it.

His present self tried to sink into the memory, shaping a version of himself inside it — the way we create ourselves in a dream so we can walk. And as that version of him stood on the riverbank within the memory, the presence of the girl grew clearer — not in sight, but in

feeling. Her silhouette brightened slightly, enough for him to sense the way she moved: graceful but cautious, as if aware of eyes on her even when she couldn't see them. He step closer to her, felt the small rise of joy in her face as She looked at the gentle waves moving across the river's surface. His present self felt that joy once, too — not because of the festival, but because she was part of it. Her happiness had once meant something to him — something he had forgotten long ago.

He could see a figure standing behind her — a version of himself from another lifetime, watching over her not as part of the festival, but as her silent guardian. No other figure around them seemed to notice the joy or the silent thread between his other lifetime and her — but his present self felt it deeply. A protective instinct that wasn't forced or taught. It was natural, immediate, as if his soul had been shaped around the idea of keeping her safe. He felt the same shyness she felt, the same quiet happiness, the same longing to stay close without crossing the line of their delicate bond. It wasn't love the way stories describe it. It was something deeper, older — like as if his soul were remembering something long forgotten, and he felt those emotions in his mind, carried straight from his heart.

As the fog continued to lift, he felt the atmosphere of the festival sharpening. The gentle flow of the river's currents, prayers merged with the sound of drums, and people moved with gentle reverence. But the brightest part of the memory wasn't the lights or the music. It was the feeling that he and the girl were connected by something invisible — a thin, unbreakable thread, stretching between them across lifetimes. With every breath he took in the present, he felt that thread tighten slightly, pulling the past closer.

He sensed a spark inside his chest — something he couldn't fully understand. His heart reacted first, trembling with a feeling both familiar and new. His mind followed, struggling to grasp it. But his soul... his soul responded with the quiet sigh of someone who has finally reached the horizon they've been walking toward for centuries. It wasn't a moment borrowed from memory; it was a moment that belonged to him.

And then the memory revealed a truth that made him long for something once again—like a story holding its breath. The river glowed brighter, the girl's silhouette softened into warmth, and the drums faded into a low hum. He felt the world tilt, gently, as if time itself had leaned closer to

whisper something to him. Not in words. In feeling. A feeling that said: this is where it began... and this is where it will return.

The scene began to shudder, as though reality itself were deciding it had revealed enough. The dusty silhouettes, the whispering echoes, the festival-light shimmering through another lifetime — everything paused. Time did not move forward or backward; it simply held its breath. His present self felt the pull again, but this time it wasn't inviting him deeper. It was calling him back. A gentle but unyielding force wrapped around him, reminding him that he did not belong fully to that memory... not yet. The world around him dimmed, the river-wind quieted, and the ancient music turned into a single trembling note suspended in the dark.

Before he let the moment slip away, he turned — slowly, as though afraid she might vanish quicker if he moved too fast. The dusty figure of the girl was still there, faint but shining like a lone star in the dark sky. She wasn't looking at him, not directly; her face was turned slightly, lost in the half-light of a world he once belonged to. But even from that distance, even through lifetimes of haze, something in her posture — a softness, a quiet trust, a waiting — struck him with the force of a forgotten promise. His chest tightened. His breath thinned. He felt the kind of ache that has no physical shape, the kind that comes only from losing someone you weren't supposed to lose.

His present self didn't blink. He couldn't. He watched her until the very last possible moment — until her outline dissolved grain by grain, until the music of that life hushed into silence, until the world around her collapsed into black, starless dark. And as she disappeared, it felt like something inside him cracked open. Not a wound, but a memory trying to breathe again. By the time the darkness closed fully around him, he realized he wasn't returning because the vision ended. He was returning because if he stayed one moment longer... he might have broken apart from the weight of a love his present heart wasn't yet ready to carry.

He tried to shake it off, that strange heaviness blooming somewhere just beneath his ribs. It wasn't emotion, nor any physical ache he could name. It felt older than both, older than memory, older than thought — a pull that existed before he ever tried to understand himself. It pressed quietly against him, like a forgotten truth waking up after too many silent years. As if some ancient current — not of water, not of light, but something far more primordial — had been waiting for him to notice. And in that

waiting, it recognized him first, long before he had the language to recognize it back.

He stepped outside, hoping the open air would dissolve whatever this feeling was. But instead, the world sharpened it. The morning breeze brushed against him as though it carried messages he couldn't translate. The trees stood too still, unnervingly observant, and even the familiar sounds of the street felt... young, almost newly born. A part of him, buried deep, kept searching the horizon instinctively — searching for something long and winding, something that should have been there. Something that once breathed and moved like a companion.

It wasn't a river he searched for. It was the absence of one — an ache so intimate it felt like missing someone, not something. He had never named that river in this life, yet somehow he expected it to appear at the end of every lane, every turn, every gust of wind — as if he had once stood at its bank every single day of a forgotten existence. A hollow throb pulsed through his chest, as though his heartbeat itself carried the memory of a current that had once held him, shaped him, and then let him go.

Even as he walked, the feeling refused to soften. Sometimes it brushed against his mind like a faraway memory, delicate and unsure. Other times it surged through him — sudden, insistent, like a wave that had travelled lifetimes just to reach this moment. It urged him to remember something he didn't yet have the courage or clarity to face. Whether it was calling him or warning him, he couldn't tell. All he knew was that it felt frighteningly alive — patient, deliberate, watching him through the folds of time.

The city around him moved with its usual rhythm, but he felt out of place inside it, as though he were walking through a dream he had already woken from. Nothing looked wrong, but everything felt slightly misplaced, slightly too empty or too bright. His steps echoed with a strange familiarity, and every corner he turned carried the same silent question: What have you forgotten? The breeze whispered through narrow streets like a voice trying to reach him from another lifetime, urging, reminding, waiting.

By the time the morning matured into full daylight, he could no longer pretend it was simple nostalgia. This was not imagination, not restlessness. Something was returning — a taste on the air, a whisper in

the bones, a pull that didn't belong to this life yet breathed like something that had always been part of him. And though he had no explanation, he felt certain of one thing: somewhere far away, something had begun to move again. Something with currents. Something with memory. Something ancient and patient, rising from quiet depths to reach for him once more.

Yet even as the heaviness tightened inside him, another feeling rose with it — quiet, searching, almost instinctive. His heart kept circling back to that dusty figure by the riverbank, trying to understand who she was, why her presence had shaken him in a way nothing else ever had. He tried to focus, to sharpen the memory, but all he could see was her outline: the softness of her posture, the unspoken pull, the sense of someone who had once meant everything.

And the more he searched for her face, the deeper something inside him began to rise. It was as if his mind, unable to find her through sight, chose another path — one hidden beneath thought, buried inside sensation. Slowly, without warning, he felt himself slipping into a deeper layer... a place where meaning was carried not by images but by instinct. A place where memory didn't rise through thought, but through pulse — through something older, truer, more deeply rooted than anything the present could explain.

And when he surrendered to that depth, he closed his eyes.

The first thing that rose was that young lady— the lady from his school-life dream. The same lady who once seated close beside his right foot in that dream, just above the knee. Her clothing was simple, not royal — its fabric carrying earthy shades of light and plainness, muted browns that suggested daily work rather than ceremony. No jewels. No crown. Nothing adorned her, only cloth.

That one dream he had carried for nearly twenty-two years like a secret pulse beneath everything ordinary. The memory should have faded by now, worn away by time and life, yet it remained untouched, alive. It didn't return as a picture — it returned as warmth. A gentle glow beneath his ribs. A presence.

As he stayed with the feeling, the vision from his dream drifted closer. And then her face took shape — startlingly clear. Those sharp, steady eyes. That quiet, calmly joyful smile. A smile that recognized him.

Recognized him in a way no one in waking life ever had. A smile that once told the school-age version of him, with effortless certainty: I found you.

The temple's vision returned — a hand pressing softly against the white pillar. Small. Gentle. Deliberate. He remembered the weight of that touch even though it wasn't his to remember. It felt like a remnant of a life he had once lived and forgotten, a sensory echo too precise — too intimate — to dismiss.

The pillar, the cool temple air, the stillness that wrapped around everything... they came back with a clarity that squeezed his chest. And the moment he turned toward that hidden figure — the girl half-playing, half-waiting behind a pillar — the same breathless recognition surged through him, the same jolt that had once shaken him awake long ago.

She wasn't just a presence.

She wasn't just a vision.

She was someone his soul had been trying — struggling — to remember for far too long.

Then a single, fragile word spoken by that girl stood behind the creamy white pillar. He could still feel how she had pressed her back lightly against the stone, half-hidden, as if waiting for him to notice her. That word she spoke wasn't loud, wasn't even clear, yet it struck him with the soul-familiar shape of a call.

A call shaped exactly like home. Its tone carried a tenderness he had never known in the real world — a warmth so ancient, so instinctively right, that it frightened him.

As though someone across lifetimes had whispered: I remember you and had been waiting for him to remember too.

All those fragments — dream, vision, voice, smile — collided inside him now with an unbearable softness. They didn't confuse him; they wounded him, in the quiet, precise way only truth can wound. He realized he had been carrying pieces of someone his entire life — someone who had appeared to him in different moments, in different forms, yet always with the same ache of familiarity.

The same one who had sat beside his knee in that school-life dream, smiling as if she had finally found what she had been searching for. The same one who had stood behind the temple pillar, whispering a word shaped like home, as if begging him not to forget her again.

And then he felt — this is also the same presence who had waited on that riverbank — half-seen, half-remembered — reaching for him through dust and darkness.

The weight of that recognition trembled inside him like a heartbeat placed slightly out of rhythm... yet truer than the one he carried in his chest.

He had finally faced the truth — and the truth did not arrive gently. It came like a tide he could not stop, flooding his mind, his body, his spirit all at once. The recognition of her — hit him with a force that left him trembling. The cost of knowing was immediate: his thoughts blurred, his breath thinned, and a weight settled into his chest so heavy it felt like he'd swallowed an entire lifetime of longing in one moment. He wasn't just mentally drained; he was spiritually exhausted, as if remembering her had ripped open some ancient wound that had been sealed only by forgetfulness.

He moved away from the crowd without realizing it, away from the lights and music and laughter that kept the festival alive. The street grew quieter as he stood at a distance from the final festival shrine, where people celebrated joy while he stood drowning in an ache he couldn't name. His parents were nearby, speaking to local people, taking pictures, pointing out decorations — but not once did they notice the stillness in him. If anyone had cared to look closely, they would have seen the contradiction on his face: a calm expression masking eyes full of tears, eyes trying to hold onto something that had already slipped across lifetimes. He hadn't lost her today. He had lost her ages ago... and only now did he understand that pain.

The tears came without permission. They fell not because he was weak, but because the truth was too immense to contain. He didn't raise a hand to wipe them away — he didn't even remember he had hands. His body felt distant, as if it belonged to someone else, someone watching from far away. His mind kept replaying the fragments — the smile in the dream, the whisper in the temple, the dusty silhouette by the riverbank — merging them into the shape of a girl he had known so deeply that even

forgetting her had been a violence. And remembering her now felt like touching the edge of a broken promise his soul once made.

After a while, even his body seemed to forget how to cry. The tears stopped, but only because the pain grew too heavy for them to carry. The sorrow shifted inward, sinking into him like something ancient trying to resurrect. His breaths came out uneven, each exhale carrying a silent ache he couldn't voice. It wasn't grief in the way the world knew grief. It was quieter, older — the kind that doesn't escape through tears but escapes through breath, through the trembling of the ribs, through the way the heart stumbles when it tries to beat around a wound it cannot heal.

He stood there, alone on the road, surrounded by celebration but untouched by it — a boy in a man's body holding a truth too large for either age to bear. Somewhere in the distance, a drumbeat echoed, but to him it sounded like a heartbeat struggling to remember its rhythm. He had found the answer he'd searched for all his life — the identity of the presence that had haunted his dreams, visions, and memories. But the answer did not bring relief. It brought the weight of a longing that had traveled through lifetimes only to arrive in a world where she no longer walked beside him. It brought the realization that the girl made of dust, river-light, temple echoes, and dream-smiles had once been flesh and blood — and that losing her had broken him long before he learned how to live.

Yet beneath the ache, beneath the storm rising through his chest, something still glowed — faint, trembling, but impossible to extinguish. Hope. A small, stubborn ember that refused to die no matter how much sorrow tried to drown it. It wasn't loud or dramatic; it lived quietly, the way truth often does before a person is strong enough to face it. And he realized then that his heart had never been hurting because the past was gone — it was hurting because some part of him had always known the truth. Even if she had turned to dust in another lifetime... something of her had not disappeared. Something of her had returned.

Because somewhere along the long path of his life, he had met someone — a stranger from distant miles, someone he'd only known through messages, screens, and laughter shared at odd hours. She had walked into his life without any explanation, without any history, yet carried a presence so familiar it shook him. At the time, he hadn't questioned it. He didn't know why her voice felt like a memory or why her existence

felt like a continuation. He only knew he could never look away. Something in him leaned toward her instinctively, as if obeying an old promise he couldn't remember making.

And now — in this moment of collapse and clarity — he understood why. The dream from his childhood rose again: the girl sitting beside his knee, her sharp eyes filled with recognition, her smile quiet and devastating, as if she had finally found someone after too long. That face — the shape of it, the softness of it, the soft but undeniable brightness in her eyes — was the same as the girl he had met in the present, the one he knew in flesh and blood. Not metaphorically similar. Not vaguely reminiscent. The same. The same smile that felt like a homecoming. The same height, the same presence, the same strange pull that made him feel seen without needing words. The realization hit him so deeply his breath faltered — as if two lifetimes had finally collided.

The more he let the truth settle, the more unbearable it became. Because the girl from his dream — the one from the temple vision, the one standing half-revealed behind a pillar, the one waiting on the riverbank in that dusty memory — had never truly left him. She had returned to him once already, in a new form, in a new life — not with memories, not with awareness, but with an attraction both of them had felt without knowing why. That unexplainable closeness, that instinctive warmth, that soft gravity between them... it had never been random. It had been recognition. Soul-recognition. A meeting written long before either of them had learned the language of this life.

And as this truth crashed through him — fierce, tender, terrifying — the tears he thought had ended returned silently. Not out of despair, but out of a heartbreak so ancient it felt holy. He wasn't crying for the past anymore. He wasn't crying for the girl he had lost by the riverbank in another lifetime. He was crying because she had found him again — and he had never realized it. He was crying because even though she walked through this life unaware, with no memory of who they once were, his soul had recognized her the moment she appeared. She had been dust once... but she had been reborn. And the hope flickering inside him now was not fragile anymore — it was the quiet, powerful certainty that some connections do not end. They circle back. They return.

When he finally lifted his head, the world appeared untouched by what had passed through him. The birds still stirred in the morning air, their wings catching the fading light as they crossed the sky. Leaves

whispered overhead as they always had, and voices drifted past in loose, careless strands of laughter. People moved forward inside their own stories, unaware that something had fractured and reformed only steps away from them. Yet he felt displaced — not broken, but slightly misaligned, as if time itself had shifted its footing beneath him. A part of him had not followed the present back. It had remained somewhere else — by a riverbank soaked in dust and memory, or beside those pale, creamy pillars where a promise had once been hidden inside a game of finding and being found.

The ache beneath his ribs returned, not sharp, not urgent — steady and patient. It no longer asked questions. It did not demand explanations or proof. It simply existed, the way grief and truth often do once they have been accepted. It asked only that he remain present with it, that he carry it forward without flinching. There was a strange calm inside that pain, as though his body had finally stopped resisting what his soul had known all along. Endurance replaced confusion. Stillness replaced fear.

He stayed where he was for a while longer, letting the present moment hold him as gently as it could. He did not reach for the memories again. He understood now that they were not meant to be summoned at will. Some things return only when they are ready — when the heart has learned how to listen without breaking. Chasing them would only scatter them back into silence. Waiting, he sensed, was a form of trust.

Slowly, he stood. His legs felt heavy, as though gravity itself had thickened around him, and his breath moved carefully, measured and deliberate. Each small motion felt significant, as if he were reentering the world after standing too close to something sacred. The noise of the city crept back in, but it no longer felt intrusive. It felt young. Temporary. Almost fragile compared to what had brushed against him moments before.

As he took his first steps forward, a certainty settled inside him — quiet, unshakable, beyond reason. The current had found him again. Not as a force that dragged or demanded, but as something that moved beside him, guiding without urgency. It did not promise ease. It did not promise reunion. It promised only direction.

And for the first time — **that was enough.**

——***——

~ The End~

“That was not a forgotten story
just one that wasn’t done yet.”

Before you begin, know—
Some stories return in fragments — not to haunt,
but because some parts never moved on
still waiting for who they were meant for.

This was never about remembering everything.
It was about what refused to fade — the breath caught
in dust,
the echo that returned without a voice.
Somewhere between silence and memory,
the fragments still hold their shape.

—***—

*This was only part of the story.
Rest belongs to whatever comes after my last breath.
If her soul still lingers — watching from the folds of time
then may these words find her. Let her know I never truly left.*

—***—

~FACTS~



Rosalia Lombardo

(13 Dec 1918 – 6 Dec 1920)

Taken by the Spanish flu just days before her 2nd birthday, is remembered as the heart of “*The Clock Between Two Hearts.*”



Edith Howard Cook

(28 Nov 1873 – 13 Oct 1876)

An American child who died at the age of 2 years 10 months, is the central figure in “*The Unspoken Rest — Beneath She Waited.*”



ANONYMOUS WHISPER

Echo of the Unspoken • Vessel of Forgotten Stories • Mirror of Souls

Anonymous Whisper is not a name — it is a voice.
A presence, not bound to one — but awakened by many.
It rises not to be seen, but to help others be remembered.

It is the silent breath behind forgotten cries,
The echo in an empty hallway where no one listens anymore.
It is the invisible hand that gently gathers sorrow,
Binding pieces of long-lost hearts into stories that still ache.

Born not from fame but from empathy,
It walks between shadows of memories and truth,
Speaking not for the silenced, but as them —
So their suffering may finally be heard.

Not one... but many.
Not a person... but a promise.
Anonymous Whisper exists between everywhere and nowhere,
In the cracks between time and grief,
In the stillness between tears and healing,
In every soul that aches without knowing why.

It is the phantom ink that stains a page with quiet rage,
The mirror that breaks itself to reflect another's wound,
And the quiet witness that never asks to be thanked — only felt.

**Anyone can be Anonymous Whisper —
if they carry the heart to feel as deeply as a forgotten soul longing to be heard. One who knows what it means to be shattered by unseen pain, not begging to be healed, but choosing to stay broken just to understand. One fierce enough to let silence burn, and soft enough to hold the hand of the lost — even in the darkest nowhere.**

This is not an author.
This is a vow — offered in silence:
“That no echo, however faint... will vanish without a trace. To speak for those who could not. To listen, until silence becomes truth. Where silence lingered too long, it becomes the breath that lifts it home and only to remember what others chose to forget.”

Author's Note

What you hold in your hands did not begin as a story.
It began as something that reached for me — something remembered, not
imagined.
A whisper shaped like a life I no longer recall, yet somehow still feel.

Memory, for me, behaves like water. It shifts. It returns.
It refuses to stay buried.
And in the quiet spaces between waking and forgetting, fragments rose
like silt from the bottom of a deep river.
Incomplete enough to question... complete enough to hurt.

I did not write this book to understand the past.
I wrote it because the past sometimes understands us first.

These pages are stitched with echoes — of footsteps once taken by
someone long forgotten, a life that slipped out of memory yet left its
shadow behind. of vows that did not die when the body did, of shadows
that waited centuries to speak again.
This is a story of remembering — not with the mind, but with the soul's
sudden stillness... the kind that feels as if another breath moves with
your own.

— Anonymous Whisper

