**Chapter one:**

**‘ There must be a word for what he is…’**

Sometimes life scares me. I'm not going to lie; even though I plan extensively life does scare me sometimes. Nothing is written in stone. My very existence is as fragile as the wispy grey webs spun in a lofty corner of my home. One draft of the overpowering wind that blows outside the window and everything comes spinning down; perfectly, in grace, as though the world stopped just to watch its beautiful destruction.
I recently had an epiphany; a very recurring yet startling one that is significant in my life. I am very, very small. I am minuscule. I am just one person in this sea of voices that struggles hard to be heard far above the din of madness that strikes every day. The world is enormous...so huge in fact that it renders me speechless. Only a person who has walked every square inch of this earth will understand the full meaning of this sentence. one who has seen every tiny bit of this world, right from the delicate fish swimming under the surface of the green sea, dancing in between rays of light as it makes its journey of life, to the birds that fly high above us all, circling the speck below in pitiful existence as they realize they are the last creatures on earth who are free. They can fly away from it all....they can take flight and disappear into the night, taking refuge in a place where they find their souls at last. They are free.
What have I seen? The next time I tell myself I am not a child anymore I must pause to think. Sheltered in this place I call home for 18 years, going about my life as though it was the only thing to do. I have lived in safety all my life...what have I seen? Children younger than me have known lives of poverty, ravaging about in the nothingness but exuding happiness as though they have everything. children who have not had time to take their first steps in the care of their mothers because they have been forced to grow up too fast...living the life of an adult trapped inside a weak vessel as they work their way to adulthood on the streets that I pass by every evening. why, even that raven perched on my ledge, cautiously peering down the ivy covered walls may have seen more than me as it made its way here...flying over vast wastelands where the meaning of life has been long lost, concrete jungles and empty spaces.
I am minuscule.

The sun will rise in a few hours; I know it. I sit here and remember …those days when I only had you. Those days when I didn’t know who I was and you helped me find myself and hang on to that person through thick and thin. Even when I was alone I knew that all I had to do is find that old tape and put it on; listen to my heart’s content and I’d know …that I wasn’t alone anymore. I’d know that you were with me and I knew you would understand-everything. I didn’t even have to try and explain; you’d just know.

I still have you to turn to when I have nowhere else to go. When the world saddens me and my heart feels heavy; when I can’t watch anymore...when I feel like the only one thrust into a crowd of millions with eyes so firmly closed to the existence of anything else, when I see the ideals that held together so strongly the world that you built fall apart and crash all around me, I know I still have you. I still have that place I can go to where nobody knows I exist except you, and nobody can take you away, not even death. No war, no bloodshed, no tearing innocent lives apart, no stifled cries of the downtrodden fading away as distant echoes which I can barely hear.

It was a very obscure and alienated feeling to discover you after you were gone…to realize that I was much after your time and yet know deep inside that, surely, you and I are one.

I always wondered where he was.

*‘’He’s a real nowhere man,*

*Sitting in his nowhere land,*

*Making all his nowhere plans for nobody.*

*Doesn’t have a point of view,*

*Knows not where he’s going to,*

*Isn’t he a bit like you and me?’’*

Perhaps he was wandering about in some obscure place, searching for something …something. Or perhaps he was under the wizened old trees that seemed to radiate with experience, watching the leaves fall onto the dusty ground one by one until winter was staring him in the face, as though intimidating him to leave. He could even be in the very next room, sipping a glass of water that had a distinct taste of plastic in it that seemed to overpower everything these days. Until you named him he had no identity….he was a nowhere man who didn’t belong anywhere.

And yet, the world was at his command….who was he?

Thoughts like these often tormented me as I struggled to find a few hours of sleep every now and then. Real things didn’t bother me as much, I had learned by now to keep them at bay…they were waiting outside my door to jump me every morning on my way to life. Like a wall that I could lean against whenever I wanted to watch that invisible hand paint realistic images across my blank ceiling, like a place where I could just sit down and watch the grass grow all around me, as real as the hand I held out to try and catching clouds of floating smoke far away that just spiralled into nothingness.

I had this funny habit of lighting cigarettes at the time and watch them, first shine steadily as though desperately trying to convey a message that only I could understand, and then slowly flicker and die. I didn’t smoke; I just liked how they smelled. And I liked to watch them. Entrancing little pellets that had no function in my life whatsoever, but just about fitted in that picture in some little niche. Like Georges Seurat’s ‘’ *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte’’.* I always felt like Seurat wanted to paint soldiers in the same piece as well. Maybe because La Grande Jatte was near La Defense, or maybe because I always think of Monet’s *Men unloading Coal* when I think of these two places. I can still see it as clearly as I did at the National Art Gallery in London. That was when I was 18, but I first caught a glimpse of this painting while reading a book in the third or fourth grade. Parasols and soldiers. They just fit. They had to…otherwise it wouldn’t be a complete picture anymore.

Sleep is on the horizon at the moment but I can still hear your voices somewhere deep inside me. It was difficult to tell exactly where, but I knew for sure that they were your voices coming from somewhere within me.

*‘’Nowhere man, the world is at your command. ‘’*

The two doors opened simultaneously; the ones in the stone panelled house that stood at the edge of the road. A woman wearing a big handkerchief on her head and a plaid peasant’s outfit with a clean, frilly apron and a big nose came out of the one on the left and the path immediately turned blue, a stocky, balding man wearing faded overalls, whose hairy knuckles I could see so clearly came out of the door on the right and the path immediately turned red. They said to me, in unison ‘’ this is where the child was born. If you enter the blue door you may look around and come out of this house, but if you enter the red one you may never leave again.’’

I had no idea what such an obscure and completely meaningless dream had. I had been having it for a few days in a row now, and I had seldom remembered dreams so vividly. The aftermath lingered the next morning, as did a distant, yet familiar taste in my mouth. This I had been experiencing since I was a child. Sometimes, when I sat in a quiet corner and racked my brains for an explanation, I would often dwell on the thought that the taste in my mouth was *pain.* Yes, you can taste pain. It feels metallic and has an aftertaste of rotten oranges, echoing like a dull, powerful sound that reached my head and resonated throughout the rest of my body. Sometimes I could even smell pain. Very rarely, but yes I knew that the somewhat nostalgic smell of something that I can only describe as concentrated, ethereal and shooting through my very veins, pulsating in my palm .

 For the first time in many days I looked around myself. Blue window panes with a potted plant or two in front of them, giving the whole place that characteristic therapy slash counselling centre feel to it. The rest of the room was intended to be white and spotless with all the furniture and various objects arranged in a sophisticated, streamlined fashion, but everything was strewn around to make it look like a piece of work that any 90s pop artist would be proud of, except for the fact that it did not have obvious streaks of bright colour. Sometimes I think bright colours create the saddest painting or set the saddest moods. I always think of Byzantine Didactic art, or clowns. The desk had wood peeling off at the corners, something I could have easily taped over but I liked the feel of it, so I always left it alone. Books were arranged neatly inside two desk draws and one pull out shelf, the rest of the books stacked away in a big, ornately carved wooden bookcase with leaves and flowering boughs that used to be a set of doors in olden times. The intricately painted blue and white porcelain doorknobs had been removed and locked away. This was at the far end of the room though. On the desk near me, more books were stacked rather untidily in a pile reaching the handles of the shelves, along with notepaper clipped hastily to a writing pad that I remembered having bought just before high school. There were also three pencil cases, or pencil stands or whatever they were, anyway they were just mugs that I no longer had any use for that held tediously sharpened #2 pencils of different lengths and painstakingly collected gel pens in blue and black that I ended up misplacing anyway. A printer and a 15’’ black notebook took up the rest of the desk. An old, transparent, half empty plastic bottle stood just at the edge of the desk where the wood was peeling off, with a brightly coloured blue cap that bore no signs of ever having been a product of a consumerist market that lay outside the window. It simply appeared as if it had existed as a part of this world all along.

I find it very difficult to answer the question as to where I am. I cannot call it a home, I cannot call it a rehab centre, and I cannot call it a communal space. I guess this is simply my room. A space which I can call my own, where I can come and go as I like and nobody will bother me about reading Murakami till three in the morning. Nobody will bother me about spray painting the walls. Nobody.

All I have to do is keep this place as clean as possible, not because somebody’s going to check on it, but because I exercise my compulsively clean habits over every object that exists here. I even have a small brush for cleaning the blue and white contact lens case that I keep on my shelf. Even the plastic ‘R’ moulded on it is cleaned compulsively every two days. As compulsively as when I clean my hands after feeding Dante. Or, to use her full name, tag a.k.a Mrs. Dante Whiskerson. I do love her immensely but I just had to be sure I wasn’t about to become a host for any number of Zoonotic diseases. Especially after my ophthalmologist, whom I consulted after a minor eye infection, told me that kissing was safer than shaking hands. That didn’t do anything to help the inherent manifestation of OCD in me.

My life was relatively peaceful at the time. Before any of these things ever showed slight inclinations of even taking place. Before the life that I had built for myself was ripped apart by things I can barely understand, even now. Like tiny shards of glass that break into a thousand more unfathomable pieces that are scattered everywhere, so much so that they blend in with the dancing beams of the morning sun that were inevitably let in by the window.

It is strange to think that at one point of time I would be making 2 minute noodles and singing ‘’Puff the magic dragon ‘’ at 8:30 in the evening, whilst talking to my cat. I feel sorry for Dante even now. Sorry that she left. She was, after all, the only true companion I’d ever had. Sometimes I wonder if she’s still alive. I can just imagine her, chasing pebbles on my terrace as they rolled down the stairs, as smooth as ever, making that familiar clicking, rattling noise that drew many a surprised mew from her.

**Chapter two: Identity**

**Fibonacci numbers**

The leaves crackled sharply as he walked on through the mass of lucid green under a canopy of blue.

He could see life burst into colour before him. A white and brown spotted butterfly gracefully spread its wings to full length, its antennae twitching with cautiousness. A pair of black and yellow acidic frogs sat on a wet, dewy leaf, looking as though their throats would burst any moment, even though he knew they would not croak. A big, hairy brown tarantula as big as his fist sat serenely on a branch. Perhaps the silvery white, misty web shining through the contrasting emerald had tired her out. His mind was racing; he had to keep himself focused, a second too long spent lingering at the vivid trees that bore fruit and it might have been a second too late.

He kept ploughing on. To keep himself alert, he ran a few songs through his head-Ella Fitzgerald, for some reason.

*‘Blue skies,*

*Smiling at me,*

*Nothing but blue skies, do I see*

*Bluebirds,*

*Singing a song,*

*Nothing but bluebirds,*

*All day long.’*

Blue skies. Like the day he first saw her. His first love, in all her glory. He never really understood why nobody appreciated her. Hundreds of people passed by her everyday and not one of them stopped to dwell in her majestic presence. His home, where his heart truly belonged…right there.

He had fallen in love with her the very first minute he laid eyes on her; never had he seen anything so beautiful, yet so simple in his life. He could remember that day as vividly as the snakes that skirted across the long, razor sharp blades of grass that he saw in front of him right now; he thought of that day every now and then when he felt like he needed a reminder of where he had found true happiness. It was spring, and the trees had their first blossoms on their lofty branches that seemed to touch a ceiling that spread across vast worlds. It was not very different from growing up; watching the first blossom of the season. Like pushing youth through every last barrier so something beautiful would be born. He imagined that was how the trees must have felt.

The ground was covered in vibrant hues of colour that somehow seemed to fit in while standing out. Earthy colours, different shades of dusk that were returning to the very ground they came from. Brilliant purple magnolias, faded brown and yellow leaves, bright pink carnations that fell to the ground as a hint of a glowing blush barely left their surfaces, big yellow daffodils seemed to nod happily at him as he sat down on a bare wooden bench that was being lazily caressed by a glimpse of the early morning sun.

Tears glistened at the corners of his eyes as he struggled to fight them back. He felt like his entire body was being lifted up off the ground; he was so full of emotion that he wished he could tear himself apart just to liberate it. He loved her more passionately than anything else he would ever see again; more than he would ever feel again. If only time would have stopped at that moment, just for him.

It was but natural to have fallen in love with her. He remembered sneaking out every morning to gaze fondly at her till his own little world of responsibilities caught up with him once again. He would watch till his heart was full, feeling content and full of bliss, and he would walk away with a spring in his step and a song on his lips. Just watching her from afar was enough to make his young heart burst to the sinews with purity of emotion. Enough to make all his troubles feel as light as the feathers he often found on the balconies and under windows, aging with dust because nobody bothered to sweep them.

A tear trickled down his cheek as he remembered her name.

‘Khangchendzonga…’

Twenty minutes later, he walked into a dusty little restaurant by the roadside, one that was still clean as far as Indian roadside joints go, in fact, cleaner than most places you would find in the country. It had that characteristic smell of clean water being poured into shiny glasses cleaned by Scotch Brite. His hair smelled of smoke and that wonderful scent that wafts into the air just after it has rained. He caught the waiter’s eye; a sort of nonverbal conversation ensued. He knew he had to get his usual order, so he left his position from the counter where he usually lingered to watch the people that came in now and then, in between carrying clanky plates of food to hungry customers.

He climbed down the narrow spiral of stairs that led to the basement; a dingy shadow seemed to have been cast on the very first step, giving it a foreboding feel. Like he wasn’t meant to be there, or the place itself wasn’t meant to exist. His head began to sink down with the stupor that seemed as though it was dancing its way around his head and enticing him…drawing him closer and closer to the sealed, barrel like vats that stood right at the back of the basement. He took off the lid and put one long finger inside…a sticky, brown, intoxicating resin was drawn out in long strands that kept falling back into the vat, making a new spiral of liquid on the surface of the dark, unknown inside.

The trees that lay on the path the same, but they seemed even more beautiful somehow. The leaves, billowing in the evening breeze, seemed to come alive. The stems started to quiver, and then struggle, and then broke free from the symmetrical borders of life to form circular patterns around the tree itself. Up and down and danced, going left and right, swerving high above the ground, as though engaged in a sort of playful tease. No human being could ever hope of touching them though.

He swerved, first to the left, then to the right, in an attempt to follow the patterns now steadily forming around the tree. He stepped back onto the still, damp earth and looked at them again, blinking slowly as though he were taking them all in one at a time. The leaves and stems were now forming two concentric clocks, going in opposite directions. The bigger clock went clockwise, and had numbers of course, but they were in a peculiar fashion. Like this:

1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,55,89,144.

The smaller clock went anti-clockwise and continued this obscure construction, like this:

233, 377, 610, 987, 1597, 2584.

The most unfathomable element , however, was that the clocks seemed to be spiralling out of control, in a conch like design, drawing him closer and closer to them. He didn’t want to be sucked into that vortex of…well he didn’t know what it was. All he knew was that it repulsed him, disgusted him to his very core and made him want to run far away, to a place where things made sense.

His insides started throbbing with an intense vulnerability. A surge of pain shot through him and rendered him weak; suddenly, with force, keeling down on all fours as though retching out his intestines, he vomited on the grass. Again and again, with more intensity each time, his head feeling duller and heavier, started to pull him back and his eyes screwed up in a mixture of confusion and concentration as he tried to purge himself of whatever it was that was forcing itself out of the very limits of his body and soul. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he collapsed on a patch of clean vegetation a little away from the yellowish brown splatter that he couldn’t believe was in his body a few minutes ago. Panting for breath and tasting a bitter ,foul stench In his throat, he closed his eyes and waited.

He waited.

As twilight crept over the horizon, the ground below came springing to life. Small, furry creatures scurried about in search of the last scrap of food for the day; birds flew home overhead in arc like formations, calling out to each other as though they were scared of losing their way. At the very edge of this patch of the mountainous area, a small light shone unsteadily for a few minutes. A group of fireflies rose out of the foliage and flew quickly out of sight. However, something on the ground still remained lit. A few sparks flew out, and slowly, crept up a long, slender blade of grass.

The flames licked the tree tops and attempted to overthrow the boundaries of the sky. Surging in hot, searing blasts, they came one after another in quick succession and spread faster than the blink of an eye, covering more and more ground at a faster pace every minute. His fingers expounded with pain but he could not scream out…in silent agony he slept on. And all around him, the naked earth burnt with anger.

As he sat leaning against the fence ; seemed like only yesterday that he did, he looked at his hand once more. There it was a reddened, wound of a stump where his index finger should have been. Gone forever, but he knew where it lay. Right where the fire had taken it, where he had left a piece of himself forever. And nothing could ever change that. He did not allow complicated thoughts to enter his head. He just lowered the dusky brown hat over his sleepy eyes and allowed himself to be overcome by fatigue. He gave in to his mistress and slept on, lost to the world outside once more. People passed him by as he lay squatted against the wooden railings but nobody bothered to disturb him or go near him. It was as though his presence was marked by a foreboding aura that warned everyone who saw it not to disturb him. But he didn’t look menacing in the least. He was sleeping, like he had not slept for years. Just like he did when he was a child….he slept on.

**Justice in chalk**

The journal was blotted and soaking wet just after that part. A big blotch of dry ink was positioned just at the right place, as though the journal was preventing itself from being read.

I knew I had to press on if I wanted this story told. I knew I had to find the words, link them together and keep reading if I wanted even a tiny bit of the world that I lived in to change. Not just for me, but for all of them. Those who had gone on and left only their memories behind. Those who were pure enough to live life with the utmost bliss, but not fortunate enough to die peacefully. Slaughtered, like young animals, in the prime of their youth.

I’m going to keep writing exactly as it has been written in the journal. A fitting tribute to all those who were taken away from me.

**As I lay in the grass, propped up against the old fence, I heard a scuffle. Quickly, I turned around, but saw nobody. That eerie feeling that I was being watched came over me again, creeping up my hands and face as fast as the receding sunlight, and I suddenly became aware that I could also hear voices.**

**The next thing I knew, a sharp pain had struck my head and my vision became blurred. The last thing I remember before losing consciousness was a scarred, sunburnt face peering over me in disgust.**

**When I came to, I wasn’t strong enough to move but I was aware of the fact that I was being dragged into a place I never imagined I would be in. My hands were tied behind my back and oddly enough, my feet felt as though they were being burned. A cold wind was sweeping all over my chest. I probably didn’t have a shirt on.**

**My eyes flickered open and I awoke.**

**A hoarse voice rang out like a bell, clear and unpleasantly loud, in what I assumed was a study where the lights had been turned off.**

**‘’Get up. Now. ‘’**

**‘’Where am I?’’**

***Wham.***

**A wooden stick the size of my arm hit me so hard on the stomach I thought I was going to vomit on the floor.**

**‘’I ask questions,’’ said the voice.**

**Hoarse spat roughly on my feet. He was a good six feet, I could see from his silhouette. And seemed to have either limited command over language(English or local, because he was trying both) or else chose to speak in very short sentences.**

**‘’So, you think we will not? I saw that fire, we know you. Tell the truth BOY!’’**

**He said the last word with such force that I thought my head would bleed from just listening to it.**

**‘’-I think there’s been a mistake.’’**

***Wham.***

**‘’CRPF not fools. CRPF catch dirty Maoists who start fire and lock him up. ‘’**

**Even though it was dark, I could catch a glimpse of him trying to suppress a sadistic, toothy grin. His teeth were as yellow as the weathered planks that I was propped up against so peacefully just hours ago. Or minutes, I could not tell*.***

**‘’I’m not a Maoist.’’**

***Wham.***

**This time, he hit me with such force that blood did in fact propel itself onto the floor, forcing gushes and gushes out of my mouth. I cried out in pain, but it was muffled by the sound of his jubilant cry. Apparently he liked the sight of blood.**

**‘’Fire burned Maoists!! Maoists who think can escape CRPF but no. We catch all!!’’**

**‘’Look, just check my wallet!! I’ve got a student ID and address in there! I’m telling you I’m not a-‘’**

**‘’STOP!!!!’’**

**I flinched, thinking I was going to be hit again but this time his nose was an inch from my face, snarling. His breath was heavy and warmer than I was comfortable with; smelling like it was mixed with tobacco and cheap liquor.**

**‘’Lies. I know lies. ‘’**

**‘’NO!! I swear I’m not lying!! Check my wallet I’m telling you!! I just happened to be there at the wrong time-‘’**

***WHAM.***

 **This time, I doubled over with the force of it and kneeled sideways on the floor, blood dripping from my eye. I wanted to shout out that they had the wrong person and that I was completely innocent but I knew it was of no use. My father had warned me about the CRPF, their brutality and how they used raw, illegal power to beat up college and school kids like me in times of emergency, just because they could. He’d also said something about ‘Police excesses’ not being applicable in this particular case of emergency but I guess I should know my country better by now. Take a few million currency notes, throw in some gold and an LCD TV and everybody will be doing back flips and balancing shiny round plastic balls on their noses.**

**I just lay on the ground, not knowing what to say or do. The only image implanted in my confused mind was the most beautiful thing I had seen in my entire life, what I dared to remember then and every day of my life since, what I held closest to my heart and wished to see with all my soul .**

**I could see my Khangchendzonga in the spring. All dressed up with flowers and caressed by the coldest, most brisk winds of the season. I saw her every day before my eyes, longing to know if she was safe. The food I got was stale but it didn’t matter; in the beginning I kept myself alive just so I would live to see her once more.**

**At first I thought I was thrown into the lock up only temporarily, and would be let out in a few days after receiving some more beatings. But days turned into months and the only thing that I was sure of was that the grey walls that held me weren’t going to be broken down any time soon. Nobody seemed to care that I had been missing for days now, I couldn’t tell how many days but nobody seemed to be doing anything to find me either. Day after day I woke up to one nightmare, and night after night I cried myself to sleep into another. I spent my waking hours trying to visualize her on the walls; that would at least make living a whole lot easier. My dreams were haunted by bushfires, clocks that ran the wrong way and a vacant feeling in my stomach that told me that the wooden stick had done some good, permanent damage. I was no longer able to breathe properly during winter; it became harder to take long breaths. But it was even harder to see my misty breathy rise and fall in front of me, because that seemed like the only life apart from me in there. A small component of my grey world that seemed to interact with me in the most miniscule way possible, and most definitely the only thing I had control over.**

**One fine day, I couldn’t stand it anymore.**

**The old man who brought me food everyday was a kind soul, I could see. He smiled at me now and then and gave me extra food out of pity. Upon talking to him once or twice I discovered that he had a son my age, who was taken away in the raids as well. I silently pitied him but co-operated and treated him with the utmost respect. That day, I quietly asked him to slip a few pieces of chalk into my cell if he could salvage them from anywhere.**

**I waited three days but it was worth it, on the fourth day I found three long, colourful pieces of chalk in the corner of the cell, right by the grate.**

**I set to work, not having been motivated to do anything for the past nine or ten months.**

**I had purple, yellow and green and that’s all I made use of. Scratching away at the coarse walls of the cell, I drew and coloured till my arm seized up.**

**When I went to sleep that night, I didn’t have to imagine her. She was right there on the walls in front of me.**

After reading the entry, I couldn’t take it anymore. It was exactly as I had been told before; he had been taken during the raids and was never seen again. I remember going to the city jail to see if there were any records of him, perhaps. This was about three years ago. But I remember it as though it happened yesterday.

It was as though all the hope had been sucked out of life and replaced with a dull, leaden feeling that I came to know as despair. Just walking up those grey stone steps gave me the feeling that I was in a place where the word 'human' had come to be redefined. Who has the right to put another human being in a cell, locked up for the rest of his life? Who had the right to judge and put fellow beings in inhuman conditions like this, I found myself asking as I walked past their cells. They seemed to have a deadened look in their eyes, knowing that they were to rot away as mere shadows of their former selves within four walls of emptiness and white that seemed to be the only constant things in their lives. Don't preach to me about god and heaven and happiness, I wanted to shout out to the rest of the world. Come here and you will understand that none of it exists. Nothing can shield you from the stark reality that you must face when you look at the faces of these people. No amount of prayer or penitence will get you out of here. And your god did this.
I'm sure they must have committed heinous, unspeakable crimes to be put away into a place where they feel like nobody deserves to remember them and chained to misery, but I see their souls slowly fading away, like the steady drip of the tap in the corner. Bit by bit, they seem to become less human as I examine their surroundings. I couldn’t even speak to them if I wanted to; a terrible silence seemed to reign over the entire place. Even the sunlight that seemed to sparingly shine in through the chipped, broken windows knew that this was a place where happiness didn't mean anything.

Where did he go, I remember asking myself? Did he fade into oblivion or perhaps leave an imprint for the rest of us to follow so that we may find him once more? Have one more cup of coffee with him and laugh at the trivialities of everyday student life as we used to so long ago? I don’t know. I can’t say where he is now but I know that he will be remembered by all those he befriended.

As I lie in my bed tonight, I keep still, wondering if they'll ever find peace. If he ever did.
And as I drift off to sleep, I am thankful that I could find mine for one more night.

Sometimes people tell me they can still see him propped up on the fence, humming Ella Fitzgerald.

**Chapter three: Pain**

**Arabesque**

The atmosphere suddenly changed…we find ourselves in front of an ivy covered window with solid black bars, out of which Debussy was issuing as clear as the evening air; calm, perfect, in tune, and in harmony with the rest of the world even if they didn’t know it. Premiere Arabesque. However, only the piano player’s fingers are visible. Chapped, but long, a little more bent at the ends than usual and playing note after note as though it was as normal as taking one breath after another. I would not be surprised if she synchronized the two, in fact. The music is soothing, and gives the entire city a very serene ambience, hiding any signs of violence and trouble if they did exist. The sky itself seems to be in sync with the music, turning for orange to pink, to slightest gray and finally, a deep, clear blue. The stark skyscrapers stood in contrast to this but they seemed to blend in somehow, perhaps reflecting the music. A small smile issues at the corner of the player’s mouth but it is unclear why, and the music continues. At the same time, tears shining like perfectly crafted pearls fall from her eyes, forming a wet silhouette down her bony cheeks and fall to the hardwood panel on the piano. The music grows stronger as her tears fall, faster and thicker, but she continues with a hint of a smile. With intense vigour, she cries quietly and plays on. Little spots form on the panel, with soft thuds every now and then, but nobody can see them but her. A few shining beads form an outline at the corner of her mouth, defining her smile and making it even more distinctive.

And she plays on.

In the same unknown city, we come to a bay front. Beautiful, clean, with not a soul in sight except for one shadow on the steps leading down to the little lanes from which it was possible to view the waters. In his early 20s, by the look of it, he was sitting face down, with his head on his knees. The tall buildings in the background stood impressively, yet provided a sense of loneliness that one could only find in a quiet corner of big cities. A kind of refreshing, yet chilling feeling. Imagine your favourite city in the entire world. A place where you loved every minute and every pebble that covered every street. Every little ethnic market, every luxury shopping complex that saw hundreds of currency notes come and go every day, the view you got from your window , looking down at the street fashion that changed every minute to the view you got from your office window, clean as ever, yet hauntingly alone. The feeling of being alone in your favourite place in the entire world.

A sort of eerie happiness, you could say.

That’s probably what was running through her mind at that very moment.

In reality, what was running through her mind was the simplest, most draining thought that anyone could ever think of.

She was tired. Just tired.

Tired of trying to understand the life she went about living everyday. Tired of trying to reason out what meaning lay in life, in books and currency notes, in lyrics from famous pieces of music, in sleeping and waking up at the same time everyday, of placing first in every examination given, in combing hair perfectly so that not even one strand stood out of place.

She did not know why she did anything anymore. The only thing she found the will to go on doing was play the piano, everyday and all night. She did nothing else but play the piano because of the simple fact that she had learned to do so even before she could learn logical thinking. It was the only bit of time that she didn’t consciously try to get meaning from something she was doing.

So she just played the piano, torn between depression and a sliver of joy as it was the only thing she could. Day after day she meted out Chopin, Debussy, Beethoven and Mozart, pausing only to immerse herself in the smooth, warm bathtub filled with lavender scented foam, sitting stoically with her fingers repeatedly running over the edges of the bath. Sometimes she would sit by the big French windows in just a soft blue robe or fluffy white towel and hold a cup of tea or coffee in her palms, piping hot, staring down at the miniature dots below until the skyline was alive with dancing pinpricks and the cup in her hands was cold and filled with soggy leaves that gave off a strong aroma nevertheless. She did nothing and said nothing to anybody. Sometimes she would switch on her phone, take a sweeping glance at all the missed calls and texts messages from people in the outside world, some significant, some not very important, but they all seemed the same to her. She could only differentiate between inside and outside now.

Her neck hurt, throbbing softly every day. She could never get rid of it, she could never explain it, but she woke up every morning with a feeling that her neck had somehow been twisted in the night and that she could never get it to feel comfortable again. She used to put ice on it and massage it nervously with her fingers but now she had given up. She just woke up every day and let it be, like a part of her morning routine. Maybe she had started sleeping the wrong way.

A swarm of monarch butterflies came fluttering out from behind a pair of oak trees at the street corner, sweeping over the dull concrete and enfolding the glossy green leaves that seemed to be leeching onto the dark wood in a strong and sudden gust of wind, as though they never wanted to be separated. The butterflies seemed to be raging on forward through the solid air, almost cutting through it as they fluttered on by the city that was slowly being engulfed in the same sort of orange light that was reflected on their scales. If you took a closer look at their scales, it seemed like they were multiplying by the minute, the orange sky seeping into every nook and cranny of their wings, but in a fragile, almost fatally delicate way that seemed as though if they fluttered any faster the scales would start being swept off and powdered into the very same nothingness that they seemed to be cutting through.

At the heart of the city slept a harbour, nestled among tall glass skyscrapers that seemed to loom out of the shadows. The waves lapped up and down gently, but not once did they encroach onto the broad, grey stairs leading to them, with smooth steel railings staked in between. As disturbed and sudden as the butterflies were, the waves were as calm and soothing. In perfect synchronization they sent ripples across the blue surface that stopped just short of the few people watching them from above the water.

A scruffy looking boy sat at the edge of the water, watching stray bits of pebble and gravel float smoothly just below the clean surface, looking as though they were a natural part of the otherwise impeccable harbour; a combination of soft and harsh gray spreading out and sometimes sinking quietly to the transparent bed of the water. He looked mesmerized by them somehow, but with effortless concentration and ease. His face was covered with the slightest hint of stubble, and traces of grit still remained at the corners of his eyes. He had a lucid green scarf wrapped rather tightly around his neck with a dark grey cardigan and dark wash jeans that looked well worn, creased behind his knees and at his ankles; his feet being encased in dark blue trainers that were tearing at the soles. However, he looked comfortable in this assortment of clothes; his hands clasped neatly in his lap but with a sort of casualness about them, completely smooth, slightly tanned, but looked well taken care of; a striking difference from the rest of his appearance.

A small, white light suddenly illuminated the front of his jeans, and, without being startled but hesitating for just a moment, he pulled out a sleek silver cell phone from his pocket and casually glanced at the flashing screen. It rang continuously for about 30 seconds before he finally flipped it open and put it to his ear, his expression remaining unchanged. His breathing became a little heavier, it seemed.

‘*Where are you?’*

No reply. He looked harder at the surface of the water; an oval shaped flint falling gracefully, deeper and deeper.

*‘I hadn’t heard from you for a while...’*

Still no answer, although he opened his mouth just a little. Perhaps he wanted to say something but his mouth seemed clammed...seemed stuck in between thought and speech.

*‘How are you?’*

He made the smallest of noises, indicating neither yes nor no.

‘’mm’’

*‘How is everyone at home? Doing alright?’*

‘’mm’’

*‘If you need any help...I’ll come back as soon as I can. ‘*

‘’mm’’

His breathing became much faster and harder. His vision became slightly blurry and a lump that felt like a fist rose in his throat.

*‘Tell them to take care. I –uh- sorry for all this. ‘*

‘’Hm-mm’’

Suddenly he snapped it shut, tears streaming warmly down his face. He put his head in his hands and gasped for breath, rubbing his eyes and gnashing his teeth violently, a scream barely escaping his moist, salty lips.

Again and again, hot tears forced themselves out of the corners of his glistening eyes, searing his skin and moistening his palms. He tried catching his breath in between short, excruciating sobs and something in his chest started twisting and coiling itself tightly into an unexplainably irreversible knot. He rope reared its head not unlike a snake, and numerous times, it wove intricately wrapped circles round and round the inside of his body. He seemed to be rasping rather than crying out, now more than ever.

After a few minutes during which he thought his head would simply explode, he managed to stop and calm himself down, his face tear stained and wrinkled. He stood up without a word, brushed himself off rather vigorously, as though he was trying to get off more than dirt and leaves. In quick, short strides, he made his way to the top of the stairs, put his hands sullenly into his pockets, seemingly making a fist inside, and walked away, disappearing into a mass of people just beyond the threshold of the harbour.

A couple of minutes later, he emerged from the grey-blue mass and walked into a glass paned department store which clicked open as he walked in. It seemed he had been there on a daily basis, for he walked right down aisle 2 and picked up a frayed old box of red Marlboros, the plastic peeling off the top and sides. His heart thumping a violent tattoo against his skin, he slipped the box right down the neck of his cardigan, which seemed to open up and swallow the box whole.

A young girl of about 6, black hair tied neatly back in pink satin ribbon, was watching him with the greatest of interest. He stared blankly at her, not knowing what to do or say. What do you say to a child who watches you shoplifting? Walking confidently forward in the smallest of white and pink sneakers, she picked up another box of Marlboros and simply placed it in his hand, barely able to reach his waist, with a muffled ‘’mmph!’’

The snake made as if to carelessly squeeze his windpipe. Breathlessly, without a word as usual, he turned and walked faster, not making eye contact with anyone at all. The store clerk, an aged woman with a curtain of grey hair, lay peacefully snoring on page 1 of the Alchemist.

As he got out of the store, he started sprinting, his hands still in his pockets. As fast as his legs could carry him, he ran past blurry shapes of transparent bubbles floating in the lazy wind, almost knocked over two girls arm in arm with identical navy blue blazers and plaid stockings, an annoying brown Chihuahua with a silly yellow bell tied neatly and much too tightly around its neck, and three students with conspicuous paper bags tucked under their arms with brand new earphones shining at their ears. It was amazing how he could still recall all this as he ran with all his might.

Finally, he stopped just a few yards away from an apartment block that, like almost everything that he saw, seemed to be grey and fading away into nothingness. It had the look of being run down, demolished and rebuilt, not very well of course, which it had been a decade ago. Jeering groups of ravens made their home on the terrace, their unyielding cries making a racket that seemed to echo through every corridor of the three storied building. Only one room was lit in the apartment on the ground floor. At the end of the street, a boy wearing a straw hat with three blue plastic fish stuck on to the side was riding a squeaky red tricycle. He seemed to be approaching slowly, just as nightfall was.

*Pathetic,* said the snake. *You’re making it so easy.*

Shut up.

*Someone is finally getting testy. Took you long enough...*

I don’t have to answer to you.

It hissed, lazily shifting its weight from his Adam’s apple to a few inches left, stretching to a cavity in his chest.

Do it then*,* he gritted his teeth. Just do it and be done with it. Don’t fill my head with your trivialities.

*Oh, but I will. There isn’t anything you can do.*

Good.

He lit a cigarette with a cheap plastic lighter, orange with green sections. The edge of the lighter seemed to glint threateningly in the sunlight.

*‘Give me one too.’*

He spun around, caught unawares. There he was, sitting in his 25 year old chair, wearing a cracked smile and an old brown cardigan. A beech walking stick lay at the foot of the chair, tepidly moving with every swing of the chair. Prussian blue slippers lay unused next to them.

‘How was work today then?’ he asked, smiling jauntily through his cracked teeth and dried out lips.

‘Fine, grandpa.’ He answered. His voice seemed to be getting shakier.

‘Come here,’ he whispered.

He inched closer to the old man, quietly. It seemed as though he had something clutched in his wizened old fist, criss-crossed with knotted blue veins that seemed to be pulsating beneath the surface of his wrinkled skin. He felt something completely smooth and compact slide into the small of his hand, and glimpsing it through the slightest crack between his muddy fingers, he turned it over and saw exactly what he knew he would; a small, bluish grey pebble, perfectly chiselled to the touch, fitting between his fingers in unison.

Feeling like lead had somehow entered his body and was weighing him down so much that he wouldn’t be able to breathe within the next second, he walked hurriedly through the door, his eyes moist with rage and sadness, but just so.

A little girl in a red polka dot dress was chasing a ladybug on a window sill inside the house, her faced contorted with joy. Flashing a watery smile at her, he ran upstairs, turned the doorknob in a balsa wood door and shut it behind him with all his might. He then stands there in confusion, unsure of what to do next. Clearly out of breath, he just stands there without a word, surveying the neat, albeit cramped room for a few minutes. Then, slowly, very slowly, he slides down the door and sits down on the floor with his back to it. He doesn’t show a hint of emotion, but simply sits there with a blank stare. The only thing he does is clasp his hands together and twiddle them, reminiscent of thumb wars that children in kindergarten might have. Again and again he attempts to recreate a fond memory; he tries to have a thumb war with himself as though it would bring her back. He remembers how she always cheated and won. He remembered, so clearly, the numerous thumb fights they had when he was a little boy. Of course, he could not play with himself, but he clasped his hands in an awkward way and kept them that way for a long time. He is in pain, certainly, but he does nothing else. Life on the other side of the door went about as normally as possible, but he stayed that way until a curtain of darkness, inching its way slowly towards him, crept up him and the rest of the room into nightfall. His eyes flickered with sleep but he forced himself to stay awake. After a while though, his head rested on the door, he nodded off.

There she was. He couldn’t believe his eyes, yes there she was, standing in front of the mirror and combing her long black hair, again, and again. Repeatedly, she took the small black comb and ran it through her fine hair, from the top of her head till the ends of her hair, in the small of her waist. Looking into the big ornate mirror, she would comb her hair repeatedly as if it were the most normal thing to do. There she was, real as ever. He tried to say something, but he was so overcome with emotion that he opened his mouth but the words never escaped his trembling lips. She was exactly as he always remembered her, tall, with shiny red cheeks, kind black eyes and the best, warmest smile in the entire world. He could see nothing but her, there was a room around her but it was all a blur to him. Greying in and out of focus, as he wondered what to do now that she was finally here, a sudden noise interrupted that happy moment. An only too familiar voice was singing:

*‘You may say I'm a dreamer*

 *But I'm not the only one*

 *I hope someday you'll join us*

 *And the world will be as one ...’*

His heart dropped to the depths of his stomach. He knew this could mean only one thing, and sure enough, when he turned around, there he was, John Lennon, singing his carefree heart out to nobody. Leaning against the wall, dressed in a clean, loose white shirt and brown slacks, his head even moved along with the silent melody that he conducted with his right hand. Enjoying every note, he sang on.

He knew this could mean only one thing. He had come *there* again.

She wasn’t real, then.

Nothing was.

He didn’t even know where ‘here’ was, but it was a familiar place. Sometimes, without realizing it, he would bring himself here, the place where all who were lost could be found. Not just his mother, but those inspirational souls who had left the world before he even had a chance to delve deep into their art. John Lennon, Hide, Nietzsche, Fitzgerald, Percy Shelley, Emile Zola, Claude Debussy…all of them dead long before he could learn to love them while they were still alive. Sometimes, he would come here and blankly stare out the window, but the world outside would never change. Always, a dull stone walkway with a street light that was always flickering. It would never go out or stay on, just flicker all the time. Sometimes it would drive him crazy, watching it attempt to live but not die yet, and he wondered why nobody bothered to fix it. And sometimes he would just concentrate all his energy into staring at the street light, and his head would feel dizzy and his eyes would water, but it didn’t matter to him because this world never changed.

Now and then, Lennon would drop in for a chat, although he only said very few words and nodded his head now and then. He looked very lean, almost starving, but had fairly short cropped hair. He didn’t know whether to laugh at himself because this was an illusion that met his starving need for inspiration, or to be scared because he was in a room full of people who didn’t exist. Nevertheless, this was his happy place, a peaceful world that he unfortunately didn’t know how to get to or get out of. He was just there sometimes.

And now, as he watched her comb her hair again, and again, and again, as though it were the only thing in the world to do, he couldn’t help but feel a small knot of happiness untangle in his chest. Sure, she probably wasn’t real but at least she was there. A smile broke across his face, and he kneeled down on the floor and leaned against the wall, watching her without a word, entranced.

**The circle of Todestrieb**

Dawn broke cautiously over this strange city, peeping out from behind the horizon as if confirming that this was indeed, the time of breaking dawn. This city didn’t seem to run according to how the earth spun; instead it spun its own orbs of time and space. Everything here was contorted, everything, unfixed.

‘More than you can imagine,’ he interjected at this point.

‘Sigh.’ A part of me wished that he really wasn’t telling me the truth, but a stronger, louder part of me knew that he was. The world is often sunk deep in misery that everyone is a part of, but cannot see... for you only realize that there are people living in nothingness when you too, have nothing.

He lay on the floor, the boy with the green cardigan (for I was never told his name) ...each time his body rose and fell with every breath, the sun seemed to inch it’s way higher and higher in the sky, until finally it penetrated through a sliver of the open window, flooding every minute particle and every tiny space in the room with that overpowering, sometimes blinding light that almost always accompanied morning.

A quick pitter- patter of steps was heard ascending, right outside a door, and then a banging of what seemed like very small fists ensued.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.

His eyes seemed to flutter, still in sleep, but did not open. He seemed to be caught in a dream.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.

A trickle of saliva escaped the corner of his dry mouth and fell with a putrid *splotch* on the wooden floor, creating a small circle of fetidness.

BANG.

The girl who was in a red polka dot dress the previous day ran in towards him, this time with yellow cloth daisies sown meticulously to the seam of her plain white dress. She bent down, peering at his face as though he were a fish in an aquarium, and tapped on his nose- once, twice, three times.

His eyes flew open to reveal two yellow, bibulous eyes scattered with red. His breath felt warm, but carried an air of illness.

The girl continued to tap his nose, gradually uncovering an impish smile on his face. With both hands, he pulled her toward him and hugged her, both brother and sister curled into a ball of embrace now.

‘Where did you go yesterday?’

*‘Nowhere.’*

‘Is it nice there?’

He laughed. ‘*Sure, it’s a lot better than here. It has lots of ladybugs for you to play with, and so much food that your stomach would bloat up like a little frog if you tried eating it all.’*

‘Frogs go bust.’ She said, placing one hand on her stomach.

*‘Ha-ha, that’s right. Frogs go bust. That’s why you shouldn’t eat all the food, or you’d go bust too.’*

‘Then why do you go there?’

*‘See my job is to make it even better before you come.’*

‘More bugs?’

*‘Sure! And I also blow bubbles in the sky all day long, so everyone would feel nice looking at them, so pretty in the blue sky.’*

‘Bubbles bust too,’ she whimpered.

*‘No, no, these are magic bubbles. You know how I make them? See there is this dragon in nowhere land, and he gave me a magic bubble pipe, so none of the bubbles I blow will ever go bust. ‘*

‘Good dragon.’

*‘Yeah, good dragon. He helps me make bubbles all day long, like this- puff!’*

‘Puff the magic dragon?’

*‘That’s right, puff the magic dragon.’* John Lennon smiled.

‘Can I come too?’

*‘Of course you can, that’s why I blow all those bubbles!’*

‘Today?’ she shrieked, jumping up and prancing around the room in a dance that seemed to frantically posses her little body.

‘Bubbles, bubbles, in the sky,

Frogs go bust but I can fly,

Let’s go let’s go, today today!’

‘And we will’, he said, his eyes still half closed.

A few minutes later, they both walked down the wooden stairs together, each step creaking as it held their weight momentarily. The girl took hold of her brother’s hand as she jumped each alternate step, squealing with delight as he swung her from one step to another. Once they were both at the bottom of the stairs, they made their way into the dimly lit kitchen. It looked well kept, but dingy, as though cooking was supposed to be kept a secret. Sunlight seemed encapsulated in a world beyond the old, but freshly washed curtains, as though the kitchen was a million miles away from the world outside.

Sitting down at the small, circular table, the girl hummed a few bars of ‘frogs go bust’, all the while staring gleefully at her brother. Looking at her from across the table, he got the impression that a very small cat was staring constantly at him, wearing a white dress with yellow cloth daisies.

Taking out two plastic bowls, one purple and another red, he shook a little cereal from a bright yellow cardboard box into them, one more than the other. Then, crossing over to the grey refrigerator, he opened a bottle of milk with a sharp, rimmed cap, the kind one would find at grocery stores in small towns and poured milk into the bowls, balancing them carefully first on the edge of the fridge door and then with his hands. Hurriedly, he carried them over to the table where they both hungrily devoured the crackling, hissing bowl of ‘honey loops, now with fortified iron’.

Suddenly, he felt a prickling sensation at the base of his head, and when he put his hand there, he could feel nothing. He scratched it a little and gave it no more thought.

She looked up at him questioningly.

Nothing.

He continued eating even though he couldn’t bear to shovel bursts of overly sweet cereal down his throat, and smiled at her.

‘So what do you want to do today?’

‘Dad said that I have to study!’

‘When did he tell you that?’ he asked, scratching his neck yet again, this time reaching lower down his spine.

‘He said every day, and today is a day....what is today?’

‘Well, what comes after Wednesday?’

She opened her mouth to say what would probably have been ‘’Thursday’’, but instead her eyes opened wide with a sort of epileptic frenzy and she darted across the table in one fell swoop and ran to the door, pushing it shut behind her with all her might, chasing a small, white tail that swished out of sight.

He smiled. She never failed to chase the cat that slept on the roof and it never failed to evade her every morning since school had been closed for the summer.

*It’s amazing how little she absorbs of what really goes on here.*

‘Well wouldn’t you like that too?’ retorted a voice from the depths of his mind. ‘Wouldn’t you want nothing to do with this?’

He didn’t answer. Instead, he dug harder at the skin on his upper back, trying to rid himself of the increasingly prickly situation that was creeping up and down his spine, arrythmically.

In the faint blue light of the bathroom, he could barely make out his own face. The mirror had been fogged permanently; spotted and smeared with steam and small, transparent stains that nobody could ever remove. *Even when she was alive,* he thought to himself.

He removed his white collared t-shirt, pulling it up over his head and away from his body when he realized why his back had been itching.

Small tufts of straight black hair fell generously from his t-shirt. They were thick and glossy, making a small, disarrayed pile on the cracked mosaic floor as they fell from his clothes. He shook his t-shirt to rid it of the last few strands and, turning to look at his back, saw that some stray ones remained perched on his skin. He brushed them off with a certain look of irritation on his face.

*Why couldn’t I feel hair when I felt my back earlier?*

When you look through a glass bowl, like the one people keep goldfish in, everything seems bloated, magnified a hundred times, at the same time very fragile, as though everything is inflated with a special sort of wind that might pop if you touch it even slightly. I don’t know how many people have this sort of vision when they’re not looking through a glass bowl, but when the *Nowhere man* told me that this Boy-with-the-green-cardigan was having glass bowl vision, I understood him perfectly. Sometimes, I dream in glass bowl vision, and when I wake up, everything seems as though it’s turned to mush, like paper Mache, pulpy and that strange colour you get in newspapers that is neither the colour of ripe peaches nor the colour of your skin. It’s the newspaper-esque colour that turns everything to pulp when I wake up from glass bowl dreams. And when you have glass bowl vision, everything oscillates from being bloated to returning to normal size. Like when you use billows to start a fire at home, pumping it up and down, up and down, with strong gusts of air escaping and coming back, in a repeated motion.

The mirror became even more enlarged with its yellowish spots and streaks, the bathroom floor seemed to fade away in the bright blue light that was engulfing everything around him, and the hair on the floor seemed to be rising and falling in an invisible gust of wind that was generated by an invisible bellow.

He felt a part of his chest tighten again. Something was uncoiling itself deep down, within the depths of his body.

He closed his ears firmly with his palms.

It had begun raining outside, but the little girl continued to run around the apartment building looking for the ginger cat. A quiet *swish* of both his tail and her dress in the sharp, unkempt grass ensued every now and then. Once or twice she got very close to him, but then he would dart off suddenly, as though remembering that they were in fact, playing a game and he could not be caught.

But she persevered, not even letting out so much as a small squeal as she trudged around in the increasingly damp soil, going round and round , her chest puffing up and down, but only slightly so.

Meanwhile, the old man had come out onto the porch again, in his Prussian blue slippers. Every now and then he would pick up a pebble from the watery street and put it in his pocket after fingering it, as though checking to see if it really was a pebble. His tartan pocket clinked with the weight of a few pebbles that he had collected during the day, the number growing slightly every few hours. He didn’t seem particularly interested in anything except if he saw an unusually smooth specimen, at which he would walk faster than usual, his mahogany cane dragging forward in the dust as fast as his wrinkled, knotted hands could carry it.

The-boy-with-the-green-cardigan had finally stopped having glass bowl vision, and had decided to settle himself quietly on the only window will in his room. The door had been left open a crack, and sometimes it would creak monotonously in the wind, lazily hanging open and then closing shut with a thud. The breeze and the spray of rain felt very comfortable on his face, and he felt more at ease than he did when he had woken up that morning, although he could not remember when he had awoken to the world of reality. Sometimes, if he tried hard enough, he could remember exactly when he slipped out of the world of flickering lights and Lennon and onto the wood panelled floor in his room, where he lived and breathed.

Suddenly, a small pebble rattled against the half closed pane of his window. Jerked unpleasantly out of his thoughts, he looked to see if anybody had thrown it at his window. Looking down onto the sparsely populated street not far below, he saw nobody standing directly below him.

*It must have been an accident. After all this is the first floor.*

An afterthought flitted across his face like a wave of fright- he looked up to see if the roof was collapsing.

It wasn’t.

Not today, at least.

He remembered the day that the roof was collapsing, and it was raining pebbles, tiles, gravel and wood. Not this roof, but the roof of the house they used to live in before any of that had ever happened. Not even in the same city, but in a small farm, hundreds of miles away, where the grass was lucidly green and the sky always had that look it wore right before it tore open and unleashed torrents of rain onto the unsuspecting world below.

Rain is a terrible, mysterious yet wonderful thing. Sometimes, it can fall lightly on your head and trickle down onto your lips, *drip drip drip* and make you feel alive. Sometimes, it can drench you through and through and make your clothes cling to your body, your hair plaster flat to your head and cover you entirely with shining beads of water. And sometimes, it can rain so heavily that it can wash your roof away and make it rain pebbles, tiles, gravel and wood. It can also take your mother away to a place where you can watch her comb her hair forever.

He remembered that day. It rained so heavily and it was so windy that he had to hold on to his sister so she wouldn’t be blown away in a rage of water and wind. It rained so much that his house was nearly two thirds submerged and the fields were nothing more than clogged, vast tracts of mud and water that flowed away from all of them as though they were a force pushing all life away. And they had never even found her.

He could still hear his father returning to the field everyday for almost a month, calling out her name and shifting small chunks of rubble to see if there was a pulse beneath it.

*Only I know where she went. And I don’t know why.*

Water. It was water that brought him here. Water that kept his father in denial and away from them all. Water that made his grandfather collect pebbles every day, guarding a secret hope that he would be able to build their house again.

It was all because of water.

At that moment, small beads of water were flowing yet again from the corner of the eyes of a woman lying motionless on a polished hardwood floor, next to a polished piano.

A long, slender couch occupied the centre of the room, white and furnished with soft, round cushions. It didn’t look like the type one sat on or even enjoyed a lazy afternoon nap, but the type you just looked at, probably in an NY decor catalogue. It looked like it was made just for that purpose, maybe even for a very thin, catlike woman to delicately place herself on with a tall glass and a lemon wedge, but just for a moment. A wide screen LCD TV occupied some space in the room towards the right, diagonally placed.. A large window opened out into a world of dim sunlight that still seemed to flood the room, though in minute, airy particles that floated into nothingness. The door itself looked transparent, but was a piece of well crafted and panelled glass that smoothly slid in and out of place.

Across the living room was, well, I guess it was just space, not a room exactly. This time, a rose window, not unlike the ones found during the Revival in 19th century France. The gray backdrop of the city was visible just outside it, skyscrapers and TV towers and houses looming disdainfully in the shadow of the lives of those who went about their busy lives on the streets below. The piano occupied the rest of the space, but none of it looked clustered together at all, it all just looked very well put together, much like the tiny pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The piano looked very expensive and well maintained, a Steinway, but had a strong feeling of having been well played through time. It was almost as though the notes were placed on an invisible string that had to be pulled out slowly, with grace and eloquence, as much as skill, every time someone sat down to play it.

The long shape of a slender woman was seen sprawled on the floor, just below the open window. At first glance one might think she was asleep but if you looked quite closely, you could see small black slivers, encasing two shiny black eyes that, when opened, looked like deep pools of some unknown, swirling liquid. In spite of this, they looked quite empty, echoing a stifled cry of childlike happiness. Her long black hair was swept over most of her face, hiding her mouth and most of her nose, but the corners of her mouth were visible, perfectly defined and unusually pale, as though something odd had happened to drain them of their colour. Even so, one could see that her high cheekbones and creamy complexion did not, in the least, make her unattractive. The beginnings of a few creases and wrinkles looked as though they were about to push their way to the surface, but she had none just then. She just looked as though life had been sucked out of every crevice in her body, leaving her an empty shell of a person. She did not look as if she had been crying, indeed the white floor was not moist, but she breathed in gasps, as though she had just been weeping for hours on end. Clothed in a bottle green dress and bare feet, she made quite an interesting picture. The liveliest part of her, however, were her fingers, which lay oddly relaxed, one hand rested on her neck, and the other on the cold floor. She was slowly and very slightly fingering a thin sterling silver necklace that lay draped around her slim neck. It looked like it may have come from a light blue Tiffany’s box.

Although she made no movement, her mind was racing. Going back to the time when she used to catch tadpoles from the stream, far away from her childhood home. She could never forget the feeling of them wriggling in her palm, in a small pool of water that she could barely contain in her fingers. They used to feel like wrinkles, oddly, but full of life, squirming, fighting for their last breath. And then when she had had enough, she would gently immerse her palm into the cold, bubbling water and free the little creature from the clasp of her reach. And it would swim away before she even knew it.

That was the only memory stuck in her mind at the time. Probably because those were the moments most filled with a sense of being alive, for lack of a better explanation. Again and again, those memories played in her mind like a battered old tape. She could feel herself being filled with a dull sensation, like her entire body had been drained of blood and filled with lead instead. Even breathing became harder by the minute. But she could never cry. It just seemed like there was a knot, somewhere deep inside her, which could not be unravelled no matter what. And that knot contained all the tears, emotions and laughter that she should have expressed, but didn’t.

She lived on the third floor of a rather pricey apartment block, in the same city, but in the kind of neighbourhood where snooty rich people roamed about the streets but never once spoke to each other. She wasn’t interested in them or their hypocritical lives, she never was. The only happy memory she could salvage from the maze of tall buildings around was the small, quaint ice cream parlour that she used to frequent with her mother. She could still taste the creamy vanilla with a cherry on top, against the cool glass cup. Or the simple but sweet and refreshing strawberry mousse with real bite sized pieces of soft strawberry. Every Saturday, she would wake up at around ten, put on her favourite pale blue dress, and hold her mother’s hand as they walked down the cobblestone streets to ‘Purple cloud’; that’s what it was called. She could even remember her mother giving her her first purse there; a small, navy blue coin purse with a red bow that had a clutch that could open and close. She’d always put buttons from old clothes in it, just for fun. Of course, that always drew a few smiles from the owner of the parlour.

But now, she felt helpless. None of that even existed now. Her parents had died long ago, so unjustly leaving her behind in a big two storied apartment, all alone with so much money she didn’t know what to do with it. She was like a bird in a gilded cage. She had to stay in, because she didn’t know how to survive outside. But there was something that made her feel trapped somehow. The only thing that gave her a remote sense of being alive was playing the piano. Over and over she’d play even though she had mastered the pieces when she was a little girl. Chopin, Mozart, Beethoven, and her favourite, Debussy, she’d spend her time hitting the keys, but softly, as though she was caressing someone she loved. All afternoon and into the night she’d play, making the otherwise empty house echo with what she knew to be the closest thing to life. Playing made even her fingers feel as though she was in control of them herself, and not as though they were a limp marionette being operated by invisible strings that hung from high above in the sky, as she usually did. She had no need to attend university; she had already attended the country’s top music school and graduated Magna Cum Laude. She had no need for a job either; she had been left enough money to live comfortably till a ripe old age. But she used to provide instrumental backgrounds for small independent movies or local jazz bars earlier. But now, she never ventured out of the house. It was as though she had connections in the outside world so much so that she could do everything from the comfort of her four walls. She’d simply communicate with clients via e-mail; she very rarely used a phone, execute the pieces with timeless skill, record them, and ask for them to be picked up from her front door. She neither met with her clients nor asked if her music received good responses. And in this way, she felt of some use, and did not have to feel guilty about adding large amounts of money to her inheritance, for these assignments paid considerably, but not phenomenally. That was much earlier. Now , she stopped working, and kept to herself completely.

She couldn’t remember exactly when she had stopped going out into the ‘world of white faces’, as she called it. Everyone wore a white mask and everyone looked the same. They all spoke to her the same way, the people she had once called friends, people at shops, people that sat next to her at bars when she was minding her own business and sipping splashy red wine out of a perfectly circular glass that she held tightly between her fingers....everybody spoke to her through a mask.

And she couldn’t tell one person from another anymore.

She remembered the first time she saw someone wearing a mask.

It was when, around the age of sixteen or seventeen, she had looked in the mirror.

It looked very natural and hadn’t formed completely by then; it was just a very wispy looking white mask that let her see her own face but still reminded her of its presence.

As she grew older, everybody else got masks. They were better made than hers too. But unlike hers, she could not tell what the person behind the mask was really feeling or even saying. As time wore on, she had lost the ability to distinguish between people. They all were the same to her. She lost the ability to communicate with them, as well as the will to speak with any living being. Instead, she started shutting herself in her house, speaking to herself and her Steinway. After a few months of this separation from the outside world, her mask began to fade away.

That was when she realized that to get rid of her mask; she had to get rid of her identity outside her world. Stop talking to anyone outside, stop reminding people outside that she existed or that they ever knew her. She wanted to be different, to be herself. And for that, she had to become nothing.

Almost ten months had passed this way. Every morning she would get up and make a small cup of hot tea that she sipped while looking out of a window, holding the small cup in her hands just to feel its warmth, to feel that there was some life in it, and keep it there, slowly sipping it until it was as cold as her own hands, at which point she could no longer tell the difference between the glazed blue porcelain and her own skin. Only the soggy dregs at the bottom reminded her that a fire had crackled and sparked inside that cup, a symbol of the life that may or may not have been contained in it.

Then, she would do some light cleaning, slowly but meticulously, dusting off tables and the Steinway with a light grey feather duster that she held at the tip of her fingers. When the dust rose and flew lightly up to mingle with the invisible seams in the air around her, she would stop dusting and watch the tiny particles as best she could, squinting her eyes to catch a glimpse of them floating and twirling away, further and further away from her until they flew out of the window or became invisible to her. Until then, she would hungrily eye them- something that moved and had a mind of its own. She hungrily eyed anything that served as a reminder of life.

In the evening, she would immerse herself completely in the warm bathtub, feeling the scathing water run all over her body and sometimes splash out of the bathtub. Often, she would run her fingers around the rim of the bathtub, fingering the ceramic and marble that ran all around her smoothly. And she would lie like this until her entire body had become wrinkled and sort of clogged with water everywhere. Then, she would slowly rise, wrap herself in a plain peach towel and sit on the rim of the bathtub to watch the water drain. She liked it when there was just a handful of water left, and while going down the small, circular, steel rimmed drain it would make small gurgles of noise, splashing down and bubbling before nothing was left of it. That too, to her, was life.

She decided that today would be different.

She had been toying with the idea of trying it for a while- the very thought scared her a little but intrigued her all the same. She desperately wanted to feel something. She knew that there was a good chance this would lead nowhere, but she wanted one last, insane chance to feel as though she were alive. She knew nothing now but how to become nothing itself.

Slowly, she rose from the floor, brushed off all her hair from her face, and took off the thin silver necklace from around her neck, placing it delicately on the Steinway. Then, as though drying her face, she pressed her damp palms into her cheeks for a minute, patting it this way and that. Then, gingerly placing her right foot forward, she hoisted herself up onto the big windowsill in front of the French window. She didn’t lose her balance, but her hand shook a little as she pulled her entire body up onto the finely polished, black surface. Even her breathing became cautiously slow. But her mind rang with the clarity of a finely tuned instrument and she knew exactly what she had to do.

She spread her entire body out onto the sill, long and slender, finally resting her head onto the cold stone. Then, she slowly stretched her hands out until they were completely straight, her palms facing downwards and her fingers reaching the edges of the sill, their tips touching the outside air lightly.

She was going to become nothing, to become everything. To become herself, to become life. While she was still a living , breathing being, she was going to embrace nothingness and overcome death, to feel life.

She didn’t know herself how long she was going to lie this way, but she knew she must, or there would be nothing left for her to do in this world or any other world. She didn’t know what came after laying still on a window sill, lying in neither this world nor the next, neither inside or outside, creeping slowly away from death in the living world to life in the world of the dead.

Slowly, but very faintly, she could feel a small knot in her chest unravelling. She could feel herself become less compact and more....fluid.

It was happening, but slowly. She might have to stay there for days, months or even years for her whole body to feel alive, but she knew it would happen, someday.

Maybe this was life.

As the knot in her chest began to unravel, the boy-with-the-green-cardigan felt uneasy. He had neither met nor seen this woman before, but at the same time that life seemed to creep back into her body, his chest began to tighten.

*Its time,* said a small voice from within him.

Is it really? He asked.

*Yes.*

This is the only way...isn’t it?

*Yes.*

Fine. Then do it, and get it over with.

He knew what was going to happen, but he wasn’t entirely prepared for it.

Outside, the little girl was very contently stroking the ginger cat that had fallen asleep in her lap. It had stopped raining, but the old man had fallen asleep on the porch, with his head nodding off to one side. His fist was closed, and there was a continuous clink ensuing from his pocket from the life and fall of his sleeping body.

The boy knew that unless he did this, nobody would be happy. Him or anybody else. They didn’t say anything but he knew that they were tired of everything. Of living a life that exuded loss and had the smell of death lingering at every corner. If he faded away too, then there would be one less person who bore that burden. If he faded away, maybe, just *maybe* he would reach that place forever too.

Slowly, he felt a numbness creeping all over his body. He knew what would happen next, but he couldn’t help smiling just a little.

In a few minutes, the snake had wrapped itself completely around his heart, which was beating fast and vigorously. After ensuring that the rope had exhausted itself completely and was neatly tied around his heart, the snake pulled itself tightly together.

With the first pull, his heart was constricted.

With the second pull, he stopped breathing.

And with the third pull, he had stopped moving completely.

Later that night, the old man and the little girl sat beside him, stroking his hands and his head, not knowing what to do. Maybe he would wake up, or maybe he had gone somewhere where their stifled cries couldn’t reach him anymore, even though his body lay limp by their side.

In a place he didn’t know how to get to and whether he even wanted to get out of, the boy-with-the-green-cardigan lay peacefully in a corner, propped up against a wall with light blue wallpaper peeling off. He was watching a tall woman with the kindest face in the world comb her long, black hair again and again.

Maybe, just maybe, this was really life.

**Chapter four : Dreams**

**Maya**

I remember the day a ladybug flew down and sat on my finger, when I was about 8 or 9. I couldn’t believe it was actually sitting on my index finger, and I could feel its tiny legs slowly creeping up and down my skin. My first thought was ‘don’t let it get away. ‘I was so cautious as to not let it get away that I stood stock still and held my breath. I watched it, fascinating as it was, with a shiny red body, small black polka dots and perfectly shaped antennae. If it climbed to the tip of my finger, I bent it so the ladybug could climb down. My eyes wide open with excitement, I held it in this manner for about two minutes, hoping and hoping that it wouldn’t fly away.

Eventually, it did.

It’s the basic nature of all humans to protect some new found happiness with all their might so they don’t lose it. That’s their first thought and always has been. A six year old kid who gets 2 bucks every month will look for the safest place to hide it, perhaps in his lunchbox or in the kennel, and tell his best friend in hushed whispers about the great deal of money he has stacked away in a place he can’t tell anybody about. A young girl who has just bought a shiny white parasol will use it everywhere in the house but never take it out, should it get dirty or wet.

The strangest thing about happiness is that you spend more time wondering when you will lose it rather than enjoying it.

(‘True,’ remarked the nowhere man at this point. And he continued on his in his monotonous drone, which I clearly hear ringing in my head as I retell this story without emotional detachment, unlike him. )

I knew Maya since she moved bang next to my parents’ place in 2003. A long haired, outspoken woman of 24, with big black rimmed, square glasses, chewing a #2 pencil eternally in the corner of her mouth, she sometimes stopped by for a cup of tea on Wednesday evenings. I don’t remember much about what she did, all I know is that she was some sort of freelancer who could work from home if she wished and got paid ridiculous amounts of money for it. She too, liked cats but didn’t have any; just big ferns and creepers and all kind of long stemmed plants and herbs that she carefully tended to every morning. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what kind of background she hailed from, or what religion she followed, if any, but I thought I sensed a somewhat spiritual soul turned completely and insanely atheist because of some teenage related stress, trauma or some other change. I might have been wrong of course, but something about her told me that I might not be after all. She behaved in the same way towards everybody, polite, but reserved, although I often caught her smirking mercilessly at door to door Christian preachers.

‘I’ve been educated in Christian institutions for a major part of my life. They annoy the hell out of me,’ she once said grimly, still biting on the eraser end of her pencil. ‘Them and hypocrites anyway. ‘

‘So you don’t like Christians?’

‘Nah, nothing like that. Any overly religious nut job does the trick. ‘

‘Ha-ha. I guess I see your point. ‘

‘Yeah, ‘she gave me a twisted smile. After a few minutes of thinking and chewing, she said ‘Take that as a cue never to ask me about my parents. OK?’

‘Got it. ‘

She stopped, took the ragged yellow pencil out of her mouth, put a few sheets of paper on the desk away and took out a slim, red pack of Marlboro Lights from her Burberry purse, took out one cigarette and lit it with a polished chrome Zippo.

She brushed back a few stray hairs from her forehead and looked straight at me.

‘Family is a complicated thing kid. You think you’ve got ‘em all figured out but it turns out you don’t know a thing. And I mean zip. ‘

I didn’t know what to say. I was 19 at the time and couldn’t entirely figure out what ‘family’ really meant to me. I didn’t really get along well with them at that point of time. I was more interested in using Morse code to have private conversations if other people were around.

I yawned, stretching my hands high above me.

‘I’m going to head back home now,’ I told her, half stretching and half standing up.

‘Sure, see you around. ‘

She was a good person to have conversations with in the evenings, and she’d let me have some wine from time to time; my parents of course thought I was too young but I would just have one sip from one of the many , many bottles she kept in her neat little kitchen. Soon I was able to distinguish different types of wine and later on, even what they were brewed from. Other than that I was a complete novice. I liked her for who she was, original, and free spirited, and unlike the neighbours, I never found any of her idiosyncrasies odd or disturbing. The neighbourhood treated her as some sort of modern day witch, in fact. True, I found pictures of her in her childhood and teenage years with many cats, Persian, Manx, stray, Tabbies, most of them black, and she did keep mostly to herself, but that just made her all the more interesting. Her lights would be the last to be turned off on the street at nights, and she would often go out onto her terrace when it rained, watching the sky contently and smoking; grey spirals floating away peacefully above her to be merged with the clouds.

June 2nd, 2004. I remember that day clearly because it was the last day of my summer break. As I was walking home from the bookstore with a cloth bag full of manga, I couldn’t help but noticing something I had never seen before on Maya’s doorstep.
 A small, ragged doll made of cloth, with bright blue buttons for eyes, looped wool for hair and a crooked, stitched up mouth and a baby pink pinafore. It looked very cute of course, but Maya didn’t have any children, nor did she let any of her relatives visit. So I found it quite strange that there should be a child’s doll on her doorstep.

*Some kid from around here probably must have left it there accidentally*, I thought. Wondering how she would react to this, I walked into my house and went straight up to my room.

I used my last University free hours to immerse myself in manga, till late that night. I saw a light burning in Maya’s house, but I was used to it.

At around one in the morning, when my head was swimming with criminal masterminds with serious sweet tooth conditions, I heard Maya’s voice.

‘Not now, I’m busy dear. How about tomorrow?’

I didn’t like eavesdropping but I guessed she was in her bedroom, as it was just at arm’s length from my window and I could hear her quite easily. I assumed she was on the phone.

‘OK why don’t you go to sleep now? It’s getting late now and it’s not good for you. ‘

Yeah, she was definitely on the phone.

‘Do you want mama to come down and tuck you in?’

That I wasn’t prepared for. It was as though she was talking to someone in the house but who called her mama?

*She’s got a cat, that’s it, she’s got a cat. She missed having one .Wonder why she didn’t tell me though.*

And then the child’s doll and the cat clicked in place. *Of course, she got something for her cat to play with while she was working.*

Turning off my lights at last, I dragged myself into bed and pulled the covers over my head.

I dreamed of black cats with wool for hair, sitting on a bed with Maya and drinking milk out of feeding bottles.

Over the next few months, as I spent a whole semester trying to keep myself alive for the sake of a bachelor’s degree, I noticed that Maya spent a lot more time inside than she normally did. I assumed her plants were being tended to as usual because they were flourishing, but I seldom saw her outside. Sometimes, I would see a child’s station wagon or a few Lego blocks strewn across the porch; what was more surprising however was that sometimes I would see clothes fit for five or six year old girls hung on her clothes line. Small orange t-shirts with white daises stitched on them, the smallest pair of jeans I had ever seen in my life and white summer dresses. In her backyard, a pair of transparent water wings had been permanently placed against the peach coloured wall, right next to, what I couldn’t help noticing, were the world’s smallest and cutest pair of slippers. Two of my fingers would probably fit in it.

I was surprised and at the same time very confused as to what was going on, because not once had I seen a child in Maya’s house. Also, I found it very strange that a cat would need jeans. Or even be willing to wear them.

Another significant change that I noticed during the few times that I did see her , was that she looked much happier than usual, instead of her sarcastic and often cranky self. She seemed to glow with an extra bounce in her step and a song on her lips. It brought to mind an illustration from Tom Sawyer, but let’s not get into that now. When she went grocery shopping every week, I would happen to catch sight of extra milk cartons, which made me think of that cat again, but then once or twice I also saw ‘Cocoa Pebbles’ and other cereal boxes popular among kids, and small, bite sized, strained fruits in miniscule, circular glass containers. Maybe she was just hungry, or on some new fangled weight loss regime. She wasn’t overweight though, but I stopped thinking about it because my brain couldn’t take the stress.

Just after my 3rd semester mid –terms, I managed to catch hold of her. She was sitting in her backyard, stretched out on the grass, and propped up against the same peach coloured walls. I was in my own backyard, taking down the washing, when I spotted her. Wearing a navy blue, knee length dress with a V-neck and black buttons, she looked like she had just returned from work. She had a Marlboro between her fingers but it wasn’t lit. She seemed to be toying with it nervously.

I rested my arms on the fence and looked down at her.

‘No lighter huh?’

‘Hey kiddo!! Long time!! But no, I do have a lighter, actually. ‘

‘You mind if I come over now?’

‘Sure, hop over the fence. ‘

I lifted myself above the wooden fence, heaved one leg over it and swung myself rather briskly onto the wet grass a foot below me. As soon as I hit the ground, I knew something was wrong because I heard a small *crack*, and my ankle gave way. I crumpled up on the floor, not knowing what to do. Immediately, Maya rushed over and heaved me up by my arms, putting one over her shoulders and helping me up.

‘Silly girl, why did you have to do it so fast? You could have taken your time coming down and this wouldn’t have happened. Here, get up,’ she added, and I gently stood on one leg; the injured one I held gingerly in the air.

‘Let’s get you inside; I’ve got some ice and a first aid kit that should patch you up in no time. ‘

Wincing, I slowly hopped my way to her back door. ‘Thanks,’ I smiled at her.

Suddenly, I caught sight of the water wings against the wall.

I opened my mouth, but shut it before any words could come out. *Probably not the best time to ask her,* I thought to myself as she opened the door with one hand, supporting me with the other so I could get inside. Once I was in, I collapsed onto the comfortable beige couch right next to the door.

‘Ha-ha!! It hurts that much does it?’

I nodded sheepishly.

‘Well, stay there. I’ll get you some ice and a handkerchief to wrap it in.’

‘Thanks, I appreciate it. ‘

‘Anytime. And don’t move!’ she added sternly, over her glasses. I saw the end of her blue dress being whisked away upstairs behind her.

I propped myself up against the soft cushions and stretched my injured leg out in front of me, with the other leg curled up beside me. I could feel Maya’s presence upstairs, although I couldn’t seem her. And she seemed to take great care not to be too loud. Apart from the usual creak of a shelf or the door, she seemed to be walking on tiptoe.

The stairs creaked, and she was back downstairs with a plastic white box and a big, pale blue cotton handkerchief.

‘Here, hold on to this. I’ll go get some ice.’ She sprang back up and ran inside the kitchen. When she came out, she had a few ice cubes wrapped up neatly in the handkerchief with the four corners tied up on top. She bent down, examined my ankle for a minute and looked up.

‘It’s nearly blue. You’ll need to press this against your ankle for a while.’

She gathered the ice and pressed it firmly, but gently against my ankle. I felt a little pain but said nothing. She sat pressing the ice on my ankle for several minutes, all the while saying nothing. Then, after quite a lot of it had melted and formed cold little slivers of ice and water at my feet, she quickly cleaned it up with some cotton from the plastic box and threw it away. Then, she opened the box and took out a roll of bandage.

‘I swear, all you kids are the same. You’re told not to do something and you do the exact opposite,’ she said, half laughing, half scolding. ‘If it’s not this it’s taking a bath, if it’s not that then it’s spilling your food all over the table, and –oh hold still, don’t keep moving your leg, and...Ah well, what’s the point of going on and on about all this? You’re barely an adult yourself; it’s much too early for you to understand all this. ‘

And my leg was comfortably bound in a clean bandage. I was of course feeling much better physically, but my head was a whirlwind. I didn’t know where any of it was coming from.

‘Er...thanks Maya. Thanks I feel a lot better now. ‘

‘It’s alright, these things happen, I told you. Now, would you like a cup of tea?’

‘Sure, that would be nice.’ I made to get up from the couch but she waved me down.

‘Just sit there; I’ll be along in a minute. And try not to make too much noise, OK? We wouldn’t want to wake anybody,’ she finished with an oddly serene smile on her face. Wisps of black hair were hanging around her face, framing it very nicely, and suddenly she looked even more grown up and mature than ever.

*Almost,* I said to myself, exercising the little control I had over myself. I was bursting to ask her a number of things for which there was simply no explanation whatsoever. *We wouldn’t want to wake anybody?* Who exactly would that be? And why were there still a pair of transparent blue children’s wings against the backyard walls?

‘Maya?’ I called nervously.

She popped her head around the kitchen wall.

‘Yeah?’

‘Whom do we not want to wake, exactly?’ I asked nervously. I could hear the faltering tone in my own voice.

She laughed, shaking her head. ‘Her, of course, who else?’

I became even more nervous. *Her? Now we’re getting somewhere, but who is Her? And what kind of name is that for a cat? Even Persian cats aren’t named Her. Are they?*

‘Maya?’ I called once more.

‘You know, this would be a lot easier if you didn’t take it upon yourself to call me every few minutes,’ she joked, walking out of the kitchen with two porcelain mugs full of steaming hot tea. The steam rose very strongly from the mugs, making a little shushing noise as it escaped into nothingness above it. That sound seemed to be amplified a hundred times; making it the only thing I seemed to hear for miles. She sat down beside me, holding a yellow mug snugly in her own hands, offering me a purple one.

‘Thanks,’ I said, still holding onto mine. It was too hot to drink, but felt like a little living thing in my hands, warm and bubbling with energy.

‘Who’s Her, Maya?’ I asked, waiting to see the immediate reaction on her face.

She looked at me very hard for about five seconds, then shook her head slightly and sipped a little tea.

‘You know, I’d expect my neighbours to at least remember that I have a daughter. ‘

‘Yeah right. I expect you’ve also got a unicorn and the tooth fairy in your kitchen?’I asked half smiling, half feeling as though the wind had been knocked out of me.

She turned to me with an even broader smile on her face than I’d seen a while ago. She certainly had a happy look on her face, but it wasn’t, for a lack of explanation, *positive.* It was a smile that looked like it had been forced on after years of torture in a dark prison cell. It was as though her features were oddly stretched together, painfully, just to smile, or that she had been learning how to smile for the first time in her life. I felt as though she really was sad on the inside but her face had become an entity by itself, not mirroring her most intricate feelings and emotions; acting of its own accord and causing her a lot of pain by doing so. Like some foreign spirit had caught hold of her and twisted her soul and her entire life in the way most beyond repair, but she was being forced to smile so the rest of the world would think she was ok. But nobody could deny that at this point of time, she did look the happiest that she ever had in a long time. I didn’t know whether to feel sorry for her or not.

‘My daughter ! What makes you forget about her? You’ve seen her, playing in the backyard with those water wings she’s so obsessed with, splashing around with the hose and running about on the front porch. You know, with that little patchwork doll I made for her. Don’t tell me she just slipped out of your head? ‘

I was completely thrown off by this attitude Maya was displaying. Was something wrong with me? No, that couldn’t be it. I couldn’t completely forget the existence of one person. No, that definitely wasn’t possible.

I thought it best to act normal at the time and go along with whatever Maya said.

‘Yeah I’m just playing with you. Of course I remember her.’

When I went to bed that night, I couldn’t help but ponder over these inexplicable events. Sure, after I started playing along with her she did seem happier somehow but that didn’t really answer a lot of questions for me.

But I remembered, as I drifted off to sleep, that her face looked like the picture of health and happiness as she spoke to me that evening. It seemed to exude happiness, the sort of happiness that you didn’t want to take away even if you had to. At the same time it felt like a fragile sort of joy, the kind that was temperamental, but cost Maya her life even for experiencing it. It was a drug that was creeping all over her skin and pulsating in her every vein, causing her smile to posses that unnatural, out of world feel to it. And I could see, deep in her eyes that she was drowning in this newfound joy. It was consuming her more than she or I could ever imagine. I already felt like she wasn’t a part of this world anymore.

The strangest bit about all this was that I was the only one who noticed that something was amiss. Everyone else, including my parents, went about their lives as though a child had not been discovered living about twenty feet away. Was something amiss in my life then? The endless debate spun around my mind, pushing me further and further into realms of thought I couldn’t see before.

You know how sometimes, maybe one in a million people or even fewer can’t tell if one particular incident in their lives was real or not? I began to wonder if the circle had completed itself again. If the picture had been painted and I realized that I wasn’t the one painting it. If webs had been spun around me, and not before me.

It happened to me once, when I was nineteen. Some very close to me at the time had just moved back to his hometown, and the fact that I was being slowly destroyed because of his absence hit me the very day after his departure. For six months straight, I would lock myself in my room and cry till I didn’t know my own name. I’d go looking for him all over the city even though a little voice in my head told me that he wasn’t going to be there.

**Waking**

One night, when I found myself suddenly conscious, suddenly unable to close my eyes, I slowly got out of bed. I was pushed beyond my last boundary. Something inside me snapped, and I couldn’t take it any longer. I was down on my knees, pleading, begging for it to stop. Torment raged inside me knowing that I would never see his face again, the one whom I called a friend. Tears poured down my face but I was tired of crying. Tired of forcing myself to be alright. I don’t know what got into me but I remember frantically searching all over my room. I bent down on all fours and crawled under my bed, I tried prising the windows and closets open for some sign of a doorway that would give me the answer I needed so desperately. I wanted to open a door which would lead me to closure. After a while, I curled up into a ball and drifted off to sleep more out of fatigue than anything else.

To this day, I don’t know if that was real or a dream. And I don’t think I want to find out.

I was afraid that this would turn out to be the second time. And I was trying as hard as I could not to let that happen.

As I look back at Maya’s story now, I wonder if I would have been better off with a second time.

Towards the end of January, Maya stopped venturing out of her house even more than usual. I don’t think she went to work either. The windows would be shut all day and only one light would be switched as night fell. During the wee hours of the morning, I thought I heard muffled crying coming from her bedroom. It didn’t sound like a human being, but more like an estranged animal. Lamenting, wailing, begging for help, the voice sounded pitiful yet fearful. It stirred something in me that yearned to help the voice and lay it to rest. But I couldn’t figure out where I would even start. It had been at least three months since I had last spoken to Maya.

The mail on her doorstep had piled up to such an extent that it now resembled a small white shroud. Her plants were withering away and her lawn was unkempt, actually the word lawn might be out of place because it bore more resemblance to half a forest than an actual lawn. Like the dark forest floor, overgrown with creepers, that would never see the sunlight through the thick boughs hanging above it; her house certainly had a neglected look about it. And I hadn’t seen her for a considerable amount of time now.

One overcast Saturday morning, the wailing ensued from Maya’s house yet again. In broad daylight, it sounded ghastly, piercing through normalcy and shattering all routine. I could hear it as clearly as if she were standing right next to me. It gnawed at me and I knew I had to do something before it drove me insane.

This time, the entire neighbourhood heard it. It pierced through every ear within a radius of fifteen yards at least. They could no longer go on pretending that there was nobody living there that they didn’t want. Even the milkman, on his daily rounds, lifted his patchy black trousers, hitched them up at his scrawny hip, and stared at Maya’s window as though he could see right through it. His protruding yellow teeth seemed to clench and he fearfully walked away, mumbling under his breath and smelling of illicit liquor in the otherwise politically correct neighbourhood.

Unable to ignore it anymore myself, I walked up to her doorstep and knocked twice. The voice continued moaning and crying with all its might. I pushed the door slightly, and to my surprise it creaked open. I ran inside, through the corridor and into the kitchen, but she wasn’t there. The voice grew more and more distraught every minute. Panicking, I sprang up the steps leading to Maya’s bedroom.

Maya was crouched next to the partially closed door, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. She looked nothing like I remembered. Her hair was lank, falling to her shoulders on either sides, and looked uncared for. Her eyes were swollen lumps of tears that were so red I was afraid she might have been bleeding out of her eyes at one point. She wore a loose fitting white night gown that seemed to be floating off of the skeletal outline of her body in the breeze that was blowing directly at her from across the window.

It was her, crying out in that pitiful voice that carried out over the din of life outside the window. But she seemed to be unaware of my presence. Her head was tilted to one side and fresh, cold tears were flowing down from her eyes that seemed to have lost all signs of life. They resembled nothing more than deserted shells of black that were flickering between sleep and wakefulness. Her mouth was open, wailing strongly, but very limply so.

I bent down and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

‘Maya?’

She responded faster than I expected. Briskly, she turned to me and clutched the front of my shirt, still moaning incessantly. She began to pull on my clothes frantically, up and down, stretching the fabric apart and making it moist with her unusually cold tears. She looked up at me, wailing with all she had. I didn’t know what to say or do. I just looked down at her and let her cry. After a minute or two, I asked her again, gently, ‘What’s wrong?’

She gasped for breath and spluttered for a few seconds, then let go of my shirt with the same, sudden force that she had seized it with. She continued to moan, but in a feebler voice. Finally, she opened her mouth and croaked a few words.

‘She is not alright. ‘

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s got a really high temperature and wont’ eat....she won’t speak, she won’t do anything. I’ve been trying to get her to come out of her bed-‘

‘Since when? ‘

‘I can’t tell...’ she said with the same gaunt look in her face. Then suddenly, as though seized with a new vigour, she grabbed the front of my clothes again and cried out even louder-

‘I can’t tell!!! It’s been so long that I can’t tell!! She won’t speak to me!!! Do you know why she won’t speak to me?’

I had not a clue as to what I should do or say next. My brain was numb and I could do nothing but be flung about like a rag doll while she held on to me and cried, as though forcing all the air out of her lungs.

After a few minutes had passed in this manner, I gently prised her fingers from my shoulders and stood up. My first thought was to go in and see if she was alright; what kind of state she really was in. Saying nothing, I left Maya with her head in her knees and pushed back the light blue curtains that obscured my view of her small bed.

It was so dark that I couldn’t even see the outline of the bed, or anything else for that matter. Fumbling about and groping the wall for a switch, I found a small one and flicked it on.

A small bed lay in the centre of the room, with yellow and pale green sheets and white petals. The blue rag doll lay at the head, and a pair of fuchsia socks lay at the other end. The mahogany closet was ajar, some clothes lying scattered randomly, children’s clothes of course, and some hanging in brightly hangers shaped to resemble different animals.

Other than that, the room resonated with emptiness.

**Chapter five: cats**

**Whispers in the wall**

I often hear sounds that come from places I can’t find. Sometimes I can hear my neighbours talking, maybe it is them but I really can’t tell. And it’s not words, just murmurs. Muffled whispers that say nothing clear to me. I can hear distant phones ringing in an otherwise quiet room, I can hear a singular wind chime tolling when I sit outside to read a book, I can hear cats mewing when none are around.

Whether I’m hearing things or not, I know that the cats are always listening. I know that they’re always patrolling the dusty streets and lanes strewn with rubble- pieces of yarn and string, dry leaves of different colours, orange, yellow, brown red and sometimes leaves that still had a touch of green in them, old shoes that people had either thrown away or lost, small feathers floating gently to the ground from pigeons that roosted high on the windows above them, and cat litter buried precociously in the dirt and sand.

Tag was an especially attentive cat, just like her mother. I know she heard the whispers too; she would tilt her head to one side and listen for any more noise that came from the other side. Her eyes would roll from side to side confusingly if she didn’t know where it is the noises were coming from.

I know a lot of people think cats are moody and selective; that’s true but they are more empathetic than people realize, and they do have minds of their own, which can really be a comfort when nobody else is there to listen.

The *Nowhere man* says cats can both, bring you into nothingness and take you away from it. They’re like keys into a different world, each one fitting only into one crevice.

I didn’t really understand what he meant by that.

Of course, I know ‘Three cool cats’ wasn’t really about three cats, but I can imagine three cool cats coming up in a beat up car.

*‘Three cool cats*

*Three cool cats*

*Are coming up in a beat up car*

*Spitting up a lift of candy bar*

*Talking on about how sharp they are*

*Three cool cats.’*

I could just see them riding up a road in my mind, in a beat up old car. One of them has a red bow under his chin and another has characteristically round Paul McCartney sunglasses perched on his triangular nose. The cat that’s steering with his two paws has an unusually big head for a cat, accompanied by bug like eyes that don’t lose sight of the road. And of course, they’re all on the rather large front seat, because the back seat is overflowing with red and white wrapped candy bars that they must eat and spit up later.

*That’s really not what they’re singing about, you know,* said the *Nowhere man.*

Yeah I know, just like you repeatedly tell me that *Puff, the magic dragon* may not necessarily be a song about a dragon.

*That may be.*

So what? I ask. I don’t really get his point.

*By changing three cool cats into actual cats and puff into an actual dragon, you-*

I’m not changing them. I grew up with them and this is how I thought of them when I was a kid. This is how I was introduced to them.

*To each his own.*

Exactly, I say, absentmindedly putting my index finger in a blob of red paint. It quickly stains the tip of my finger but it feels nice, so I play around with it and mix it up, making both it and my finger soggier than ever.

*The smell I have smelled so many times, in so many places.*

What, paint?

*That overpowering smell that wafts up people’s noses and makes them twirl, dance and sing.*

Right. That. But that’s not what I’m doing here.

A wind chime tolls out of nowhere, once again. He hears nothing, as usual, and I ignore it.

A tap gushes out water that slowly reduces itself to a deep din.

A motorcycle revs up the road from outside.

A child trips and falls, and screams piercingly.

Somebody clinks a spatula against a vessel.

A ’65 cherry melody maker belonging to the girl who lives two floors above me slowly strums ‘Love’s been good to me’. Sinatra fan.

*That’s the only way you know, people are out there and so-*

Listening.

I guess the *Nowhere* man was right. He had to tell me about other people’s lives for me to realize what had happened to them. That I was , in some twisted little sadistic way, connected to them because our lives emerged from nothing and dissolved into nothing. And of course, that was one of the *Nowhere man’s* duties. To track down the lives of those that bear his mark- nowhere. I guess McCartney didn’t tell the rest of the world that. Maybe he knew that we wouldn’t be able to stomach the truth. Maybe the *Nowhere man* himself couldn’t have faced the truth when they were all....when they were all a part of this world and not a part of the world that everyone celebrates as being long gone.

I realize that after the four left, this was his only way to feel like he still had the identity that they gave him. I don’t know if he cried about it, or felt any sadness at all; like everybody else he meets he only tells them tales of oblivion that fulfil his duty to that person. And then he moves on to the next with the additional story of the person he visited previously.

My life was about to go back into nothingness too. I was about to become nothing.

I was hoping, in some desperate way, that I would become a cat when my time came. Of course, I knew that this was going to happen for a very long time. I don’t know exactly when I realized it, but I definitely did. Maybe it was when I tried to make friends as a child but all the kids in the neighbourhood would tell each other not to talk to me because I was ‘strange.’ Maybe it was when I sat out on the terrace of my parents’ house, filled with anger and sadness, weighing my shoulders down until I could crack, but I couldn’t cry a single tear. Maybe it was when I my first cat died under the wheel of somebody else’s car and I stayed there all night, watching her still body, crouching under the engine.

Or maybe it is now, when I know that I will become nothing, but I feel that it is natural.

So this must be natural for me.

When I was an undergrad student, I used to pass by a road everyday on my way to university that had something very interesting yet trivial spray painted on it. It had been there for as long as I could remember, or at least since I started attending that university. Somebody had spray painted in navy blue, the words ‘’the global non-crisis’’. It stood out very well against a dark grey wall, but I don’t know how many people actually read it. I don’t know if the person who wrote it meant what I think it means, or just as a trivial prank, or copied it from somewhere or somebody else. But it made a whole lot of sense to me. The world feared death, the feeling of being empty and losing everything dear to them, but in fact death is the most natural thing in the world. Even more natural than living, I would say. No, in the words of my favourite philosopher Murakami, ‘Death is a part of life, not the opposite of it.’ So in fact death is incorporated into our everyday lives. It’s when we can feel but no longer express, it’s when we can look but no longer see, it’s in the tiniest of things, maybe even a dying habit, like a small box that contains all the toys you collected from chocolate eggs as a teenager. It lingers when people die too, in the subtle as well as blatant ways; when you wear your mother’s favourite dress but she’s no longer around to tell you how nicely it fits you, in the pages of second hand books that have notes from the owner written on them, like important things in their lives connected to the book or an old orchid pressed in between the last few pages. This is death.

Then how does one find happiness?

**Happiness**

It is my twentieth birthday tomorrow, but I’m not particularly excited. In fact I’ve come to develop a sort of aversion to birthdays partly because people who usually leave me alone will discover through some grapevine that I’m remotely connected to and then come to talk to me. So I have to deal with a lot of unnecessary small talk, which lead me to my grand tradition of never venturing out on my birthday. It’s much more peaceful this way.

They’re showing *Le fabuleux destin d’Amelie Poulain* at a cultural centre today. I probably won’t go; besides I have company.

The *Nowhere man* hasn’t left for a day now. He’s been here since the night before last, just sitting in a corner and talking about things that I sometimes listen to.

I think about all the people he’s told me about..... the prisoner, the Steinway woman and the boy-with-the-green-cardigan. All the people they were connected to, all the people they shrank away from, all the things they had to endure to reach where they are now....where are they?

I ask him this.

*They are nowhere, and nowhere is inside them.*

Of course, an answer that doesn’t give me any direct explanations. That’s how he usually answers the few questions I’ve asked him over the short duration of time that I’ve interacted with him.

If they are nowhere and nowhere is inside them, are they happy?

Were they ever happy?

Was the boy-with-the-green-cardigan content just with seeing his mother and John Lennon forever, in a place in this universe that he wasn’t even sure existed? Was the Steinway woman content with lying on a window sill just to feel alive as she felt the wind on her face and gravity calling out to her longingly? As longingly as the prisoner and the mountain called out to each other?

I suppose. If that isn’t happiness then I don’t think anything is.

I heat some milk to make tea as the clock strikes eleven. It bubbles over, frothing madly and rising to the surface after a few minutes of heat, so I turn it off and walk out to the balcony to escape that very strong smell of burnt milk that I really can’t tolerate. That’s like asking a poet to write prose.

That was happiness, I told myself. Happiness lies in the little things. Of course, all those grand plans anybody makes for himself or another person probably won’t turn out as he planned, but he can still be happy. Happiness lies in the smallest of moments, so miniscule that if you don’t look hard enough it will pass you by and never come back. The key, I guess, is *wanting* to find it. Like feeling ladybugs sit on your finger for the smallest amount of time, like catching a glimpse of the sun that elusively peeps out from behind the clouds when it’s raining melancholy on the world below, like having a soft bed that you can sink into at the end of a tentatively suicidal day or eating fresh oranges that you stole from the neighbours tree.

As midnight approaches, the *nowhere man* totters over to me on his short, frail legs and tells me to grasp his hand.

It was time.

Taking a deep breath, I drop the clock I had picked up and took one last look at my house. It was nice living there.

I close my eyes.

When I opened them, I really never imagined I would see what I saw before me.

I was sprawled inside a muddy crevice that was so dark I couldn’t make out my hand from the walls of mud that enclosed me. However, there was a stream of orange light that was slowly becoming brighter and brighter. First, it was just a spot on the ground but slowly it became a thin line and then a beam of light, until finally I realized that I was in a pit, and I could easily get out of it by hoisting myself out of it.

The first thing I felt and smelled when I put my hands up on the ground to pull myself out was damp, green grass. That wonderful smell the earth wears just after it has rained. And when I’m out of the pit, I see that I’m in a vast, garden that I couldn’t figure out the beginning, middle or end of. But it was wonderfully green, and the ground was covered with spots of sunlight dancing alternately in and out of my reach. A gentle breeze caressed me, softly pushing my hair out of my face and filling every particle in my body.

There was a stream on my far left that I couldn’t fully see because it was a little distance away, but the setting sun was reflected on its surface, in layers of white, orange and pink that sank to the bottom of the stream and came back up , all in one harmonious wave. Trees that were so much in full bloom that they resembled little clouds stood every few metres, but they were not green at all. every leaf bore the mark of being neither in this world or the real one (if indeed there was a difference); they were all falling fast onto the ground but left the tree with so many that it didn’t make a difference- they were all shimmering shades of orange, yellow, brown and red, shining with all their might as the flitted through the air, some of them reaching me and some just lightly wafting into the open skies above me.

The sky- was just how I always imagined a perfect sky would look like. Cloudy, but not about to rain, grey with flecks of blue that gave me that odd sensation in my mouth I sometimes called pain, mixed with a tinge of joy.

I was here.

There is no heaven, but sometimes you get what you always wanted.

The only flaw with this sort of happiness is that there is no way of telling if it belongs to the real world or one that doesn’t exist. There is no way of telling if you are real or not. There is no way of telling if your mind is eternally playing tricks on you or not.

But, that is happiness. It exists nowhere because it can be found everywhere, and by finding it you merge into nothingness.

That is, you go nowhere.