

Where Whispers Wake Up

By Kriti Majumdar

They first noticed each other by the lakeshore in early August. Noticed—not in the grand, cinematic way people describe it, but in that subtle, human way when loneliness recognizes itself in another.

It was always the same time. 8:30 PM. Late enough for the sky to blush, early enough for shadows to still stretch politely. Anuja walked slowly, wrapped in her shawl, wearing an expression that was hard to decipher. Nina wore running shoes and a finance-hardened face, but her pace slowed near Anuja. No matter what else changed, they crossed each other there. First came the nods. Then smiles—eventually, the words. It took a month.

“I think the ducks like you,” Nina had said, pointing at a family waddling close.

“Maybe they think I’m one of them,” Anuja replied. “Always around, never really flying off.” *Bound by what my family will say* – this bit, she didn’t say out loud.

That day, they shared coffee at a lakeside café and soon, the coffee shop became theirs. A quiet nook that smelled of cinnamon and comfort.

Anuja never spoke of Samar much. Just in scattered references. “My husband’s allergic to cinnamon,” she once said, licking the foam from her upper lip. Nina smiled, wiping the tiny foam drop still sitting on Anuja’s cupid’s bow.

They talked about books, childhood cities, stupid clients, moon phases, ice cream flavours, world leaders, zodiac signs, and everything—except the ache they were both hiding behind their words. Nina noticed the calluses on Anuja’s fingers, and

Anuja observed the way Nina held her coffee cup like she was bracing herself. It all built up quietly. Intimately. Without confession.

On a summer's evening, it suddenly began to rain. The two unprepared women sat in the downpour until their clothes stuck to their bodies and they couldn't stop laughing at the sorry appearance of one another. Anuja looked at Nina, hair matted, mascara smudged, and wanted to say something dangerous. But she held back. Nina squeezed her hand. Enough was said in that sliver of silence.

A year passed, and Nina hit a career milestone. A promotion. A transfer. A celebration that tasted like steel. "I'll keep in touch," she promised.

At first, she did. Long calls on Friday nights. Memes on bad days. One-word replies on rushed mornings. And then, nothing.

It was as if life happened. Or maybe un-life. The dull hum of responsibilities, bills, birthdays, medical appointments, the grind. Time moved forward, merciless and beige.

Until one Tuesday evening, 5 years since the first lakeshore rendezvous, Anuja's husband, Samar, walked into the living room with his phone pressed to his ear. "Anu," he said quietly. "It's Damien. Nina's... gone."

Anuja blinked. She didn't ask how. Somehow, she already knew. That Nina, of all people, wouldn't die with a bang. She'd slip away gently. Like steam from a teacup.

They flew to Calgary. Damien was, after all, Samar's biggest client. Samar offered his condolences. A small group of mourners surrounded the casket. Nina's husband. Co-workers. A cousin. Two neighbours. And Anuja.

She stood at the edge, eyes burning, fists clenched. Not with grief. With rage.

How dare she?

How dare she leave without saying goodbye? Without a last message? Without telling where the spare key to her caustic humour was hidden?

"She was mine," Anuja thought, as tears carved paths down her cheeks. **"My woman. I loved her."**

The scent of lilies and loss filled the room. Anuja stepped closer to the casket. Nina lay still, wrapped in satin. Her lips no longer smirked. Her eyes would never sparkle mid-sentence again.

And then... it happened.

Anuja shivered. Not from the cold. But from a sudden warmth. A phantom arm around her shoulder. A breath against her cheek.

She leaned in, half-mad, half-mourning, and heard it.

A whisper. As real as the polished wood of the casket.

"I will forever be your woman."

Her heart clenched. Her knees weakened. But she wouldn't fall here. Not here. Not in front of everyone.

She turned and walked away. Graceful. Dignified. With fire in her chest and fog in her throat.

Damien watched her go, brow furrowed. Then, with a sad chuckle, said to no one in particular, "Bless them, women. They have the softest hearts."

Anuja crossed the street. The sky above was bruised with dusk. A single café blinked in welcome on the corner. She pushed the door open, a tiny bell announcing her entry.

“One chai latte,” she said. Then paused. “No—two.”

She took the window seat. Steam curled from the cup like an old secret returning home.

“I was afraid you’d never decide,” she whispered to the air across from her. “The day I heard about your wedding with Damien, I knew. That was your way of loving me. Quietly. From afar. Without chaos.”

She looked out the window. A child laughed on the sidewalk. A cyclist whizzed past. A duck flapped down onto the street as if it were still the lake.

She looked at the second cup.

As if in response, a faint swirl formed on the surface. A tiny stir. Not quite a ripple. Almost a smile.

And then—there it was. That voice. Firm. Smoky. Sacred.

“I always told you... I’d be your woman.”

Anuja smiled. Tears blinked out and a pair of drops fell into her cup.

She took a sip. The warmth spread through her like a memory with hands.

Outside, life carried on.

Inside, two cups sat. One full. One empty.

But love? Love lingered. In whispers.

In steam.

In the silence between words never said.