The Life I Saved

Abe

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A memoir-inspired novel

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Author's Note

This is a memoir-inspired work of fiction. Names, identifying details, and certain circumstances have been changed or compressed to protect privacy. The emotional truth remains at the center of the story.

Content note: this book contains themes of emotional abuse, alcoholism in the home, racism, family separation, grief, and survival.

For Mae Noi,

and for every child who had to become their own safe place.

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Chapter 1 — The Boy Who Built Houses Out of Bicycles

I used to think happiness was loud.

Not loud like shouting. Not the kind of loud that made your shoulders climb toward your ears or made you listen for footsteps outside your door.

I mean real loud.

The kind of loud that came from boys running barefoot down a dirt road with paint buckets swinging from their hands. The kind that came from dogs barking at nothing, motorbikes coughing smoke into the afternoon, aunties laughing from plastic chairs outside small shops, and my friends yelling my name like the whole village belonged to us.

"Abe! Hurry up!"

"I'm coming!"

"You always say that!"

"Because you're always too early!"

Back then, I thought the world was made of heat, rice fields, temple bells, and bad ideas.

I grew up in the countryside of Thailand, far enough from Bangkok that the city felt like another country. The road outside my grandmother's house was cracked and dusty in the dry season, muddy and dramatic in the rainy season. Everyone knew everyone, which meant everyone also knew your business before you did.

If I ran past the noodle shop with paint on my shirt, someone would shout, "Abe! What did you destroy today?"

If I climbed a tree too high, someone would yell, "Your grandma will beat you!"

If I walked beside a girl, the whole village would somehow know by dinner.

That was home.

Annoying. Hot. Nosy. Alive.

I was a skinny kid with black wavy hair that never listened, skin that made strangers pause before deciding what I was, and eyes my grandmother said were "too busy."

"You are always thinking something," she told me once, squinting at me from her chair.

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm just standing."

"Your face is planning a crime."

She was right most of the time.

My grandmother, Mae Noi, had a body that didn't obey her the way it used to. One side of her was weaker. Her hand trembled when she lifted a cup. Some mornings, she could walk around the house with her cane, muttering complaints at the floor like it had personally offended her.

Other mornings, she sat still for a long time, pretending she was only resting.

I knew the difference.

Children know more than adults think.

When she had bad days, I brought her medicine. I carried bowls of rice to her chair. I helped her stand when she tried to act like she didn't need help.

"Don't pull me like I'm a sack of rice," she snapped once.

"Then don't fall like one."

Her eyes widened.

For one second, I thought I was dead.

Then she laughed.

It came out rough and sudden, like an old engine starting. I laughed too, mostly because I was relieved she hadn't thrown something at me.

Mae Noi was disabled, but she was not soft. If pity came near her, she attacked it.

"Don't look at me like that," she would say.

"Like what?"

"Like I am already gone."

"I don't."

"Your face is loud."

So I learned to smile.

Even when I was scared.

Especially when I was scared.

My mother worked abroad. That was how everyone said it, like it explained everything.

Your mother works abroad.

Your mother sends money.

Your mother is busy.

Be good for your grandmother.

So I was good.

Mostly.

My father was somewhere in Europe. He existed in photographs, rumors, and the kind of silence adults used when they didn't want children asking questions.

I saw a photo of him once. He was standing beside a shiny car, wearing clean clothes, smiling like the world had always opened doors for him. There was a glass of something expensive in his hand. Behind him was a building that looked too perfect to be real.

I remember staring at the picture and thinking, So that's where he is.

Not dead.

Not lost.

Just elsewhere.

That was worse in a way I didn't understand yet.

As a child, I didn't have the language for abandonment. I only had questions.

Does he think about me?

Would he know my voice?

If I saw him, would I call him Dad?

Would he answer?

I didn't ask those questions out loud. Grandma's face changed whenever his name came near a conversation. The village aunties lowered their voices. My mother, during her calls, moved past the topic like stepping over broken glass.

So I learned not to ask.

Instead, I built things.

Badly.

Building things was easier than understanding people.

Behind Grandma's house, there was a tree that leaned over a patch of dry ground. To me, it was not a tree. It was real estate. Strategic high ground. Future headquarters.

I gathered my friends one afternoon and announced, "We're building a tree house."

Niran stared at the tree.

"With what money?"

"Money is not important."

"It is important for wood."

"We will find wood."

"Where?"

I pointed vaguely toward the village.

"Everywhere."

That was how most of my projects began: confidence first, details later.

We stole — no, borrowed — scrap wood from behind a half-finished house. We found bent nails, rope, old plastic sheets, and one hammer with a handle that felt loose enough to kill someone. We worked for three days under the sun, sweating like workers on a real construction site, arguing constantly.

"Hold it straight!"

"I am holding it straight!"

"No, you're holding it stupid!"

"You hold it then!"

The tree house came out crooked. One side leaned downward like it had lost hope. The ladder had gaps. The roof leaked. Whenever more than three of us climbed inside, the whole structure made a sound that suggested it was reconsidering its existence.

To me, it was perfect.

From up there, we could see over the fields. We could see rooftops, temple trees, smoke from cooking fires, and motorbikes moving along

the road like insects. We sat in that dangerous little box eating snacks and discussing our futures with the seriousness of kings.

Niran wanted to own a hotel.

Lek wanted to become a singer, even though his voice made dogs uncomfortable.

Chai said he would join the army because uniforms made men look important.

"What about you, Abe?" they asked.

I looked out at the fields.

"I'm going to build something nobody has ever seen before."

Everyone groaned.

That usually meant they would have to help.

My greatest invention came during a hot season so brutal the road shimmered like it was melting.

I found an old metal trailer frame behind a neighbor's shed. It had two wheels, rust everywhere, and no clear purpose. Naturally, I decided it was the foundation of a mobile house.

Not a toy.

A real mobile house.

Powered by a bicycle.

This made sense in my head.

People paid for houses. People paid for vehicles. If I combined both, I had basically solved poverty.

I explained this to my friends.

They looked concerned.

"You want us to sit inside a house pulled by a bicycle?" Niran asked.

"Yes."

"Who rides the bicycle?"

"Me."

"Why you?"

"Because I invented it."

"That makes me trust it less."

But they helped anyway, because childhood friendship is mostly loyalty to stupid ideas.

We built the walls out of cardboard and thin wood. The roof was a plastic sheet tied down with rope. The door opened only if you kicked it near the bottom. I drew windows on the side with black marker because actual windows required technology beyond our budget.

When it was done, I stood in front of it with my hands on my hips.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “the future.”

Lek poked the wall. It bent inward.

“The future is weak.”

“The future is light-weight.”

They climbed into the trailer house while I sat on the bicycle seat at the front. I gripped the handlebars like a pilot. The sun burned my neck. My heart pounded with excitement.

For a few glorious seconds, it moved.

The wheels turned. The trailer creaked. My friends cheered.

I pedaled harder.

Then the left side dipped.

Someone screamed.

The whole trailer tilted, dragged sideways, and collapsed into a ditch with a sound like a dying cabinet.

For a moment, there was silence.

Dust floated around us.

My knee hurt. My bicycle was half on top of me. Someone’s foot stuck out from the wreckage.

Then I raised one finger and said, “Prototype one has failed.”

They laughed so hard the auntie from the noodle shop came outside to see if someone had died.

That was the best part of childhood.

Failure didn’t feel final yet.

A broken trailer was funny. A crooked tree house was charming. A tiger painted badly on a wall could become a rare dog-eyed tiger if I said it with enough confidence.

We painted many walls.

Abandoned buildings were our canvas. We carried buckets of cheap paint and brushes with stiff bristles, marching like artists with no permission and no fear of consequences.

I painted dragons with uneven teeth. Heroes with swords too large for their arms. English words I didn't fully understand because they looked cool. Once, I painted myself standing on top of a tiger, holding a sword above my head.

Niran studied it for a long time.

"The tiger looks like a dog."

I threw a brush at him.

"It's not a dog!"

"It has dog eyes."

"It's a tiger from Europe."

"You don't know Europe."

"My father is there."

The words came out before I thought about them.

Everyone went quiet for half a second.

Then Lek said, "European tigers are probably rich."

We laughed, and the strange feeling passed.

But not completely.

That was how my father existed in my childhood. Not as a man. As a sentence that accidentally escaped.

My father is in Europe.

My father has money.

My father is not here.

Whenever that thought got too close, I ran faster, climbed higher, painted bigger, invented something worse.

Movement was easier than sadness.

There was an old graveyard near the edge of the village, half-swallowed by weeds and trees.

Adults told us not to go there, which meant we went often.

We pretended we were brave.

We were not.

The grave markers leaned at strange angles. Some names had faded. Small offerings sat in front of certain graves. The air felt cooler there, even in the afternoon. Birds moved suddenly in the branches and made us jump every time.

"Touch that one," Chai whispered, pointing at the oldest grave.

"You touch it."

"I dared you."

"I reject the dare."

"That's illegal."

"What law?"

"Graveyard law."

Once, Niran claimed that if you stepped on a grave, the spirit would follow you home and sit on your chest while you slept.

"That's not true," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Because ghosts have better things to do."

"Like what?"

I didn't know.

"Ghost business."

We crept between the stones, daring each other to go farther. Then a bird exploded out of a tree above us and all five of us screamed like little children, which we were, and ran all the way back to the road.

Niran lost one sandal.

For weeks, we claimed a ghost had taken it as payment.

I liked the graveyard, even though it scared me. Maybe because it made the world feel bigger. It reminded me that everyone had a story before they became a name on stone. Everyone had loved someone, lost someone, wanted something, feared something.

I didn't think of it that clearly back then.

Back then, I only thought: I wonder who they were.

Maybe that was the beginning of me becoming someone who carried ghosts.

The temple was different.

The temple did not feel haunted. It felt still.

On holy days, Grandma made me wash properly, wear decent clothes, and stop moving like "a monkey with a fever." We brought offerings. I carried what she couldn't. She walked slowly with her cane, refusing help until she needed it, then insulting me when I gave it.

At the temple, incense smoke curled through warm air. Monks moved quietly in orange robes.

Bells rang softly. Stray cats slept wherever they pleased, as if enlightenment belonged to them first.

I didn't understand everything.

But I understood peace.

At the temple, nobody asked about my father. Nobody asked why my mother was abroad.

Nobody looked at Grandma with pity unless they wanted to risk being cursed under her breath.

And then there was Mali.

She was my age, with sharp eyes and a calm face that made me nervous because it looked like she could see every stupid thought before I said it. She came to the temple with her family and wore a bracelet with tiny beads around her wrist.

The first time she spoke to me, I was balancing a stick on my finger.

"You're bad at that," she said.

The stick fell immediately.

"I wasn't trying."

"That makes it worse."

I hated her for three seconds.

Then I wanted her to talk to me again.

I started showing her things, which was my childish way of saying please like me.

I showed her the tree house.

She looked up at it and said, "Do you want to die?"

"It's stronger than it looks."

"It looks dead."

I showed her my wall paintings.

She pointed at the tiger.

"Why does it look like a dog?"

I almost walked into traffic.

Eventually, I stopped trying to impress her and started telling her the truth.

That surprised me.

The truth was not something I gave away easily, even as a child. But Mali had a way of listening without grabbing at my words. She didn't gasp at the sad parts. She didn't turn them into gossip.

She didn't say empty things like "don't think too much."

She just sat beside me under the temple trees and let me speak.

I told her about Grandma's bad days.

I told her about my mother's calls from far away.

I told her about the photo of my father in Europe, standing beside a car that looked cleaner than anything in our village.

"Do you miss him?" she asked.

I picked at the dirt with a stick.

"I don't know him."

"That's not what I asked."

I hated that she noticed the difference.

"I think," I said slowly, "I miss the idea of him."

Mali didn't answer right away.

Then she said, "That sounds lonely."

I laughed because I didn't know what else to do.

"Maybe."

Inside, something whispered, Yes.

One evening after prayers, the sky turned purple behind the temple roof. The air smelled like incense, rain, and fried garlic from somewhere down the road. Mali and I walked near the wall where moss grew between cracks.

My heart started acting stupid.

Say it.

No.

Say it.

Absolutely not.

If you don't say it now, you'll never say it.

Good.

We walked in silence for a few steps.

Then my mouth betrayed me.

"I think I like you."

Mali turned her head.

I immediately wanted to become a tree.

"I mean, I know I like you," I said quickly. "Not think. I know. Unless that is weird. Then maybe I think. But I do. Like you. I mean."

She stared.

My soul left my body.

Then she smiled.

"You talk too much when you're scared."

"I'm not scared."

"You screamed in the graveyard."

"That was strategy."

She laughed.

I loved her right then.

Not in the adult way. Not in the heavy way. In the childhood way, where love feels like sunlight hitting your face and you don't yet know sunlight can disappear.

After that, we became something like a couple.

Nobody officially said it. There was no ceremony. No dramatic confession under fireworks. We just started walking together more. Sitting together more. Sharing snacks. Talking after temple visits while our families pretended not to notice.

The village noticed, of course.

The village noticed everything.

Aunties smiled too much. Boys teased me. Grandma asked why I suddenly cared about combing my hair.

"I always comb my hair."

"You always fight your hair and lose."

Mali and I talked about the future like children do, without understanding that the future has teeth.

She wanted to see Bangkok.

I wanted to see the world.

"Even Europe?" she asked once.

I looked away.

"Maybe."

She didn't push.

That was another thing I loved about her.

She knew some doors opened only from the inside.

Back then, I believed happiness could survive if I remembered it hard enough.

I believed Grandma would always be in her chair, scolding me.

I believed my friends would always be waiting at the road with bad ideas.

I believed Mali would always sit beside me under temple trees.

I believed my mother would come home one day and finally stay.

I even believed, in a small hidden place inside me, that my father might remember he had a son.

Children believe many impossible things.

Not because they are stupid.

Because no one has broken the world in front of them yet.

When I think about that time now, the memories come in pieces.

Sun on my neck.

Paint under my fingernails.

Grandma's trembling hand.

Mali's laugh.

A broken bicycle in a ditch.

A temple bell.

The smell of rain on dirt.

My friends shouting my name.

A house that was poor, but warm.

A life that was incomplete, but still mine.

I didn't know I was happy.

That is the cruelest thing about childhood.

You never know you are living inside something precious until the world reaches in and takes it from you.

And when it does, nobody warns you.

Nobody says, Remember this. This is the last normal day.

Nobody says, Hold her hand longer.

Nobody says, Ask your grandmother one more question.

Nobody says, Look at your friends carefully, because one day their faces will blur and you will hate yourself for forgetting the exact sound of their voices.

Nobody says any of that.

Life just keeps moving.

A motorbike passes.

A dog barks.

Rain starts falling somewhere beyond the fields.

And a boy with black wavy hair runs barefoot down a dirt road, laughing, not knowing that one day he will cross an ocean and spend years trying to find his way back to the person he was before he learned how much leaving could hurt.

Chapter 2 — The Country I Couldn't Imagine

The first time I heard I was moving to Canada, I thought my mother was joking.

Not because she sounded playful.

She almost never sounded playful on the phone. Her voice usually came through tired, rushed, and far away, like she was speaking from a room I would never be allowed to enter.

But Canada?

Canada was not real to me.

Canada was a flag in textbooks. A red maple leaf. Snow. Hockey. White people in winter jackets. A place adults mentioned when they talked about "good education" and "better future," the same way they talked about heaven: with confidence, but no proof.

It was not a place where I could imagine myself waking up.

It was not a place where Grandma's chair would fit.

It was not a place where Mali would wait for me under temple trees.

So when my mother said, "You're coming to Canada," I laughed once.

A small laugh.

The kind that escaped before I understood the room had become serious.

Nobody laughed back.

I was sitting on the wooden floor near Grandma's chair. The fan above us turned lazily, moving hot air around instead of cooling anything. Outside, someone's motorbike coughed past the house. A dog barked like it had discovered a conspiracy.

Grandma was close enough to hear everything. Her face had gone still.

That scared me more than my mother's words.

Grandma was never still.

She always had something to say. A complaint. A warning. A comment about how I was sitting like a lazy buffalo. But this time, she only looked at the phone in my hand.

"Canada?" I said.

"Yes."

"For vacation?"

"No."

My throat tightened.

"For how long?"

There was a pause.

Then my mother said, "You'll live here."

The fan kept turning.

I remember that.

I remember the stupid fan more clearly than I remember my own answer. I stared at the blades going around and around, thinking they looked too slow to be useful.

Maybe my mind chose the fan because the real thing was too large.

Live there.

Not visit.

Not see.

Not maybe.

Live.

"What about Grandma?" I asked.

"She'll be taken care of."

That sentence made something hot rise in my chest.

Taken care of.

Adults loved sentences like that. Clean sentences. Efficient sentences. Sentences that packed suffering into words small enough to ignore.

Grandma heard it too. Her mouth tightened.

I looked at her and then away because I could not stand her face.

"What about school?" I asked.

"You'll go to school there."

"What about my friends?"

"You'll make new ones."

"What about Mali?"

The question came out quieter than the others.

My mother sighed.

Not cruelly, exactly. More like I had asked something childish, which I had, because I was a child.

"You're young, Abe. You'll forget."

I looked down at my knees.

I wanted to say, No, I won't.

I wanted to tell her that forgetting was not something people could order you to do. I wanted to tell her that Mali was not a toy I had outgrown, that my friends were not replaceable, that Grandma was not furniture that could stay behind while I was shipped somewhere colder.

But the words did not come.

Even then, I was learning the shape of silence.

So I only said, "When?"

"Soon."

Soon.

Another adult word.

Short. Soft. Deadly.

After the call ended, the room felt different. Nothing had moved, but everything had changed.

The rice cooker was still in the corner. Grandma's medicine still sat on the small table. The fan still turned above us. Outside, the village continued as if my life had not just been cut in half.

Grandma reached for her cup with her trembling hand.

I stood quickly. "I'll get it."

"I can get it."

"You'll spill."

"I spilled one time."

"You spilled yesterday."

She glared at me.

Usually, I would grin.

That day, I didn't.

I handed her the cup. She took it, drank slowly, then placed it down with more care than necessary.

"You heard your mother," she said.

I nodded.

"You will go."

I looked at her.

"That's it?"

"What do you want me to do? Fight the airplane?"

I almost laughed. Almost.

Then my face twisted in a way I hated.

Grandma saw it and looked away.

That hurt more than if she had scolded me.

"Do you want me to go?" I asked.

Her eyes snapped back.

"Stupid boy."

I swallowed.

She leaned forward slightly, one hand gripping the arm of her chair.

"You think I want this house quiet? You think I want to eat alone? You think I want no one here to annoy me?"

I stared at the floor.

"But you will go," she said. "Because children do not stay small because old people are lonely."

My eyes burned.

I hated that sentence.

I hated it because it sounded wise.

I hated it because it sounded final.

"I can stay," I said.

"No."

"I can help you."

"You are a child."

"I already help you."

"Yes," she said, and her voice softened in a way that made it worse. "Too much."

I looked up.

Grandma's face had changed again. Not weak. Not pitiful. Just tired.

"You carry medicine," she said. "You carry rice. You carry me when I fall. You carry questions adults should have answered for you. You think I don't see?"

I didn't know what to say.

The room blurred.

Grandma clicked her tongue.

"Don't cry."

"I'm not."

"Your face is loud."

I laughed then, but it broke halfway.

She reached out with her shaking hand and hit my knee lightly.

"Go be more than this village," she said.

I wanted to tell her the village was enough.

That she was enough.

That Mali was enough.

That my friends and the tree house and the temple and the rice fields and the stupid trailer house in the ditch were enough.

But some part of me knew children were not asked what was enough.

Adults decided the size of your future, then acted surprised when it hurt to grow into it.

After that day, time became strange.

The village looked the same, but I started seeing it like someone already leaving.

The road seemed longer.

The fields seemed brighter.

The temple bell sounded louder.

Even the annoying aunties outside the noodle shop became precious, which made me angry. I did not want to miss people who shouted my business across the road.

"Abe!" one of them called as I walked past. "Why are you walking like an old man?"

"I'm thinking."

"Dangerous!"

Normally I would have joked back. Instead, I waved and kept walking.

I started collecting memories without meaning to.

The smell of grilled pork from the street stall.

The sound of rain hitting the roof.

The way Grandma muttered prayers under her breath.

The rough bark of the tree beneath our tree house.

The chipped paint on the wall where my dog-eyed tiger stood, still heroic, still ridiculous.

I touched that wall one afternoon when no one was watching.

The paint had faded in places.

I wondered how long it would last after I was gone.

Would people still see it and think of me?

Or would it just become another ugly wall?

My friends found out before I told them.

That was village life. News traveled faster than courage.

Niran was the first to confront me.

We were sitting in the tree house, which had somehow survived longer than anyone expected.

The floor creaked beneath us. Lek was eating something wrapped in a banana leaf. Chai was carving his name into the wood with a small knife even though we told him to stop damaging our already damaged architecture.

Niran looked at me and said, "You're going to Canada?"

Everyone went quiet.

I wanted to lie.

I wanted to say no, adults were confused, nothing was decided, Canada had rejected me personally.

Instead, I nodded.

"When?" Lek asked.

"Soon."

They all hated the word too. I could see it.

Chai stabbed the knife into the wood.

"Canada has bears."

I blinked.

"What?"

"Bears. Big ones."

"Not in the house."

"How do you know?"

I didn't.

Niran leaned back against the wall. The whole tree house shifted slightly.

"Maybe you'll become rich," he said.

"Maybe."

"You'll forget us."

"No, I won't."

"You say that now."

"I won't."

Lek looked down at his food.

"People leave," he said. "Then they become busy."

I wanted to argue, but I had no evidence. My mother was busy. My father was busy enjoying Europe. Adults were always busy when distance made love inconvenient.

"I'll call," I said.

Niran smirked. "With what money?"

"I'll find money."

"You'll speak English and act important."

"I already act important."

"That's true."

They laughed, but it was the wrong kind.

Too sharp.

Too forced.

We spent that afternoon doing what boys do when they do not know how to say goodbye. We insulted each other. We threw fruit peels. We argued about whose future would be most impressive. We climbed down from the tree house and walked to the graveyard because someone said we needed to say goodbye to Niran's stolen sandal ghost.

At the graveyard, everything felt still.

Even my friends lowered their voices.

Chai pointed at one of the old markers.

"Tell the ghosts you're leaving."

"You tell them."

"They don't know me."

"They stole Niran's sandal. They know all of us."

Niran crossed his arms. "I still want that sandal back."

We laughed.

Then silence came again.

I looked at the faded graves and felt something I could not name.

Maybe this is what leaving is, I thought.

Becoming a ghost before you die.

Still existing somewhere, but not where people can touch you.

I didn't say that out loud.

At that age, boys could talk about ghosts, monsters, bears, and death, but not sadness.

Sadness had to disguise itself as jokes.

Mali was harder.

I avoided telling her for two days after she already knew.

Coward.

The word followed me everywhere.

Coward.

I saw her at the temple near sunset. She was standing by the side wall, the one with moss growing between cracks. Her bracelet was on her wrist. Her hair was tied back. Her face was calm.

Too calm.

"You weren't going to tell me?" she asked.

I stopped walking.

"I was."

"When? From the airplane?"

"That would be difficult."

Her mouth twitched, but she did not smile.

I stepped closer.

"My mother decided," I said.

"I know."

"I didn't choose it."

"I know."

"I don't want to go."

Mali looked away toward the temple courtyard. A monk passed in the distance. Incense smoke moved through the air. Somewhere, a bell rang once.

Everything looked too peaceful.

It made me angry.

The world should have looked broken because I felt broken.

"When?" she asked.

"Soon."

Her fingers tightened around her bracelet.

I wanted her to cry.

I hated myself for wanting that.

If she cried, it would prove I mattered. If she begged me not to go, it would mean I was not the only one being torn apart. But she did neither.

She only nodded.

"You'll like it there," she said.

"No, I won't."

"You don't know."

"I know."

"You'll go to a good school."

"I don't care."

"You'll have a better future."

"I don't care."

She finally looked at me then, and her eyes were not as calm as her face.

"Yes, you do."

That silenced me.

Because she was right.

Somewhere beneath the panic and grief, a small part of me was curious. Canada was terrifying, but it was also large. A place with schools, roads, snow, money, possibility. A place where maybe I could become someone bigger than the boy with paint on his hands.

I hated that part of myself.

It felt like betrayal.

Mali sat down near the wall. I sat beside her.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

Then I said, "I'll call you."

"Okay."

"I'll come back."

"Okay."

"I won't forget."

She looked at me.

"Don't promise things because you're scared."

That hurt.

"I mean it."

"I know you mean it now."

"What does that mean?"

"It means later is different."

I wanted to be angry. It would have been easier.

But Mali's voice was not cruel. It was sad in a way that sounded older than both of us.

She picked up a small stone and rolled it between her fingers.

"My cousin moved to Bangkok," she said. "He said he would visit every month. Then every holiday. Then New Year. Now my aunt says he is busy."

"I'm not your cousin."

"No," she said. "But distance is distance."

I stared at my hands.

They were still stained with paint near the nails.

"I don't want you to move on," I admitted.

The words felt ugly once they were outside me.

Mali did not answer right away.

Then she said, "I don't want to be left behind."

That was the first time I understood that leaving hurt both people differently.

The one who leaves loses the place.

The one who stays loses the person.

Both feel abandoned.

We sat together until the sky darkened. Before she left, I wanted to hold her hand, but I didn't know if I was allowed. She solved it by taking mine.

Her hand was warm.

I remember that with painful clarity.

Not her exact face anymore. Not every word. But her hand.

Warm. Small. Real.

"Don't become someone else," she said.

I forced a smile.

"I'll become Canadian."

"That is someone else."

"I'll say sorry all the time."

"You already should."

I laughed.

She smiled then, barely.

And because I was a child, I thought that smile meant we would survive it.

The days before leaving became full of preparations I hated.

Documents.

Suitcases.

Adults talking.

Clothes folded and refolded.

Relatives giving advice I did not ask for.

"Study hard."

"Don't be lazy."

"Listen to your mother."

"Canada is cold."

"Wear jackets."

"Don't forget Thai language."

"Don't become arrogant."

Everyone gave me instructions as if I were being assembled for export.

No one asked if I was afraid.

Or maybe they did not ask because the answer was obvious.

Grandma became practical. Too practical.

She told me which small items to pack. She gave me a cloth pouch and said to keep important things inside. She reminded me to eat properly, not trust people too easily, not waste money, not walk around in the cold with wet hair.

"Wet hair makes you sick," she said.

"I don't think that's how it works."

"It is how it works if I say it."

She gave me a small amulet from the temple.

"For protection," she said.

I turned it over in my hand.

It was light.

Too light for what I needed it to do.

"Will it protect you too?" I asked.

She gave me a look.

"I am scarier than spirits."

That was true.

The night before I left, I could not sleep.

I lay on the floor, listening to the house breathe.

Wood shifting.

Insects outside.

Grandma coughing once in her room.

The fan turning above me.

I tried to memorize everything.

The shape of shadows on the wall.

The smell of old wood and herbs.

The sound of my own home.

Don't forget.

I repeated it like a prayer.

Don't forget.

Don't forget.

Don't forget.

But memory is not loyal just because you beg.

At the airport, the world became too bright.

Too crowded.

Too fast.

I had never liked airports. They felt like places where people pretended leaving was normal.

Everyone dragged luggage behind them like they were not carrying invisible things too.

Grandma came with me as far as she could.

She looked smaller there.

I hated that.

In the village, she was Mae Noi. Sharp-tongued. Impossible. Stronger than her body. In the airport, surrounded by glass and announcements

and people moving with purpose, she looked like an old woman with a cane.

I wanted to carry her back home.

Instead, she adjusted my collar.

"You will listen," she said.

I nodded.

"You will study."

I nodded.

"You will not walk outside in snow with wet hair."

I almost smiled.

"I know."

"You will call."

"I will."

Her hand trembled against my shirt.

She noticed me looking and pulled it back.

"Don't make that face."

"What face?"

Her eyes shone.

"Like you are leaving your soul behind."

That was when I broke.

Not loudly.

I did not fall to the floor. I did not scream. I did not make a scene for strangers to watch.

Tears just came, and I hated them because I felt too old to cry and too young to leave.

Grandma pulled me close with one arm.

She smelled like herbs and soap.

For a second, I was small again.

Then she whispered, "Go."

One word.

I think she said it because if she said more, she would ask me to stay.

So I went.

On the plane, I sat by the window.

Thailand disappeared slowly. First the airport roads. Then buildings. Then fields. Then clouds.

I pressed my forehead against the glass until it hurt.

Somewhere below was Grandma's house.

The tree house.

The graveyard.

The temple.

Mali.

My friends.

My whole life, shrinking into land I could no longer touch.

I thought I would feel excitement eventually.

A new country.

A new school.

A better future.

That was what adults promised.

But all I felt was grief.

And guilt.

Because beneath the grief, beneath the guilt, beneath the fear, there was still that small terrible spark of curiosity.

What if Canada changes everything?

I hated myself for wondering.

I did not know then that Canada would change everything.

Just not gently.

When the plane crossed the ocean, I was still a boy from Thailand.

By the time it landed, the world had already started asking me to become someone else.

Chapter 3 — The Country Made of Weather

Canada did not feel like a country at first.

It felt like weather.

Cold weather.

Grey weather.

Weather that pushed its hands into your jacket, found the places your clothes failed to protect, and touched your bones like it had a legal right to be there.

The first breath I took outside the airport hurt.

Not badly. Not enough to make me cough. But enough to make me stop for half a second and think, Ah. So the air here is angry.

People had warned me.

"Canada is cold."

"Bring a jacket."

"Don't walk outside with wet hair."

Grandma had warned me so many times I almost found it funny.

But nobody had explained that cold could feel personal.

In Thailand, heat surrounded you. It pressed against your skin, followed you into shade, made your shirt stick to your back and your thoughts move slower. Heat was annoying, but it was familiar. It was part of the world that raised me.

Canadian cold was different.

It did not surround me.

It attacked.

At the airport, people moved quickly through bright halls with luggage wheels rattling across the floor. Signs were written in English and French. Everyone seemed to know where to go except me. Families hugged. Drivers held up names on white boards. Airport staff smiled with faces that looked trained to be helpful from a distance.

My mother stood near the arrivals area.

For a second, I did not know what to feel.

I had imagined that moment many times before leaving Thailand. In my head, I would see her, run to her, and something missing inside me would finally return to its place. She had been a voice through a phone for so long that I thought seeing her in person would feel like finding a lost part of home.

Instead, it felt awkward.

She looked older than I expected.

Sharper.

Not in her face exactly, but in the way she held herself. Her eyes moved over me quickly, checking my clothes, my bag, my hair, my posture.

"You're thin," she said.

That was the first thing.

Not I missed you.

Not welcome.

Not are you tired?

You're thin.

I smiled because I did not know what else to do.

"I ate."

"You don't look like it."

She took one of my bags, then immediately complained that I had packed badly.

"You put heavy things on top? Why? You don't think?"

My chest tightened.

We had not even left the airport.

I told myself she was tired.

She had worked hard.

She had been alone.

She had sacrificed.

That was what everyone said.

Your mother sacrificed for you.

So if her words felt sharp, I decided I was the one holding them wrong.

Outside, Toronto waited like a machine.

Roads, lights, cars, signs, concrete, glass. Everything was larger and more organized than the village, but less alive. The city did not spill into itself the way Thai places did. In Thailand, life happened everywhere — food stalls on roadsides, aunties sitting outside, dogs sleeping in inconvenient places, motorbikes sliding through gaps that did not legally exist.

Toronto had lines.

Lanes.

Signals.

Rules.

People waited.

Even their impatience had structure.

In the car, I pressed my face near the window and watched the highway lights stretch into the distance. Buildings rose in clusters. Some looked like glass boxes. Some looked like they had been designed by people who hated curves. Snow sat on the sides of the road in dirty piles, grey and heavy, nothing like the clean white snow I had seen in pictures.

"This is Toronto?" I asked.

"Part of it," my mother said.

I nodded.

I had expected wonder.

I had expected myself to feel something big.

Instead, I felt very small.

The apartment was not warm in the way Grandma's house was warm.

It had heat, yes. The air inside was controlled. The windows sealed. The floors clean.

Everything worked the way it was supposed to.

But warmth is not only temperature.

That first night, I sat on the edge of a bed that was supposed to be mine and listened to the unfamiliar hum of the building. Pipes. Heating. Distant footsteps. A muffled television from somewhere beyond the wall. Outside, the city glowed through the window, streetlights reflecting off wet pavement and old snow.

I took out the small amulet Grandma had given me and held it in my palm.

For protection.

It felt too light.

My phone buzzed.

A message from Niran.

Did bears eat you yet?

I laughed.

The sound surprised me.

I typed back: Not yet. They are waiting until I learn English better.

Then another message.

Mali.

Are you there?

I stared at her name for a long time.

I wanted to answer with something beautiful. Something brave. Something that would prove distance had not already started working against us.

Instead, I typed: Yes. It's cold.

She replied: Wear a jacket, Canadian boy.

I smiled.

Then I cried.

Quietly.

Because my mother was in the next room and I did not want her to hear.

The next morning, Canada looked worse.

Grey sky. Grey road. Grey buildings. Grey snow. Even the trees looked like they had given up and were waiting for instructions.

My mother took me outside to show me the route to school and nearby places. She walked fast.

I followed, struggling with my jacket zipper and the strange feeling of shoes on icy sidewalks.

"Careful," she said. "You walk like you've never seen winter."

"I haven't."

"That's not an excuse to fall."

We passed a Tim Hortons. Red sign, people inside holding paper cups, steam against the windows.

"That's very Canadian," she said.

"What is?"

"Tim Hortons."

"What do they sell?"

"Coffee. Donuts. Food."

"Is it good?"

She shrugged. "It's cheap."

Later, I would learn that Tim Hortons was less a restaurant and more a national coping mechanism. People complained about it constantly but still lined up every morning. They said the coffee was worse than before, the donuts were smaller, the service was slow, and then ordered anyway.

That felt very Canadian to me.

Disappointment, but with loyalty points.

The bus was another lesson.

People stood quietly at the stop, wrapped in coats, faces half-hidden by scarves. Nobody spoke unless they had to. When the bus arrived, everyone entered in order. No pushing. No shouting.

Just tapping cards and moving inward.

I watched someone step on another person's shoe.

"Sorry," they both said at the same time.

I stared.

Why did both apologize?

In Thailand, people were loud about small things and quiet about large ones. In Canada, people apologized to furniture.

At school, I learned the difference between being welcomed and belonging.

The staff were kind. Teachers smiled. Students were polite enough. People asked where I was from, and when I said Thailand, some said they loved Thai food. A few asked if I spoke

"Taiwanese," which confused me so much I did not know where to begin.

Some students were curious.

Some were friendly.

Some looked through me.

No one was openly cruel at first, which made me think I was lucky.

But loneliness does not always need cruelty.

Sometimes loneliness is being surrounded by people who do not dislike you, but do not know how to reach you.

At lunch, I sat with a group of boys who talked about hockey, video games, basketball, and teachers they hated. I knew some of the games. I knew nothing about hockey except that Canadians treated it like religion with fighting. They argued about teams, players, trades, playoffs, and whether the Leafs would disappoint them again.

"The Leafs always disappoint," one boy said.

"Still our year," another replied.

Everyone laughed like this was a national wound.

I laughed too, half a second late.

That became my rhythm.

Laugh half a second late.

Answer two words too carefully.

Translate the joke after it had already passed.

Smile when confused.

Nod when tired.

Pretend.

English was not impossible for me, but living inside it was exhausting. School English, textbook English, conversation English, sarcasm English — they were not the same language. People spoke fast, swallowed words, used slang that made no sense, and expected me to understand from tone alone.

"What's up?"

I looked up.

"No?"

The boy blinked. "What?"

I thought he had asked what was above me.

For the rest of the day, I hated myself.

It was not even a big mistake. Nobody laughed cruelly. Nobody cared. But I carried it home like evidence.

See?

You don't belong here.

At home, my mother asked how school went.

"Good," I said.

That became my favorite lie.

Good.

It fit everywhere.

How was school?

Good.

How are you feeling?

Good.

Do you like Canada?

Good.

Are you making friends?

Good.

Good was safe because it asked nothing from the person hearing it.

But my mother did not always accept safe answers.

"You need to speak more," she said one evening while I did homework at the kitchen table.

"I speak."

"Not enough. You're too quiet."

"I'm still learning."

"You think people will wait for you? This is Canada. If you act weak, people step over you."

I stared at my notebook.

Weak.

The word landed harder than it should have.

"I'm trying," I said.

"You always say that."

My pencil stopped moving.

She continued washing dishes, water running too loudly.

"You have opportunity here. Better school. Better future. Do you know how many people want this? And you sit there looking miserable."

"I'm not miserable."

"Then fix your face."

My face.

Always my face.

Too sad. Too angry. Too tired. Too blank. Too much.

I wanted to say, I left everything.

I wanted to say, I miss Grandma.

I wanted to say, I don't know who I am here.

But the words stayed behind my teeth.

Instead, I looked down and said, "Okay."

She sighed.

That sigh became familiar.

It said: You are disappointing me again.

I studied harder after that.

At first, studying was about survival in a new country. I needed the grades. I needed the language. I needed teachers to see that I was not stupid just because I was slower to answer.

Then studying became something else.

A place to hide.

Numbers did not care where I came from.

Science did not ask me to explain my accent.

Essays were difficult, but at least a rubric told me what was expected.

If I worked long enough, I could improve.

That made school feel more merciful than home.

At night, I messaged Mali until the time difference made us both tired.

She told me about the village.

A new shop opened near the road.

Niran fell off a motorbike and claimed it was on purpose.

The tree house lost part of its roof in a storm.

Grandma asked if I was eating enough.

I typed back quickly at first.

I told her about snow.

About buses.

About students wearing shorts indoors during winter like they were trying to prove dominance over nature.

About Tim Hortons.

About how Canadians said sorry even when someone else bumped into them.

Mali sent laughing emojis.

For a while, it felt like we were holding a thread between two countries.

Thin, but still there.

Then school got busier.

Her replies came later.

Mine did too.

Sometimes I saw her message during class and told myself I would answer after.

Then after became evening.

Evening became tomorrow.

Tomorrow became guilt.

Distance did not cut us apart dramatically.

It loosened us.

One missed call.

One short reply.

One story not told because it required too much explanation.

One day, I realized I did not know what she had eaten for breakfast, who she sat beside, what made her laugh that week, whether she still wore the bracelet.

Love, I learned, needed ordinary details to stay alive.

Distance starved it first.

Then time finished the job.

Grandma was harder to call because seeing her face on the screen hurt.

Her connection was bad. The image froze often. Sometimes her voice came late, her mouth moving before the sound arrived. She looked smaller inside the phone, trapped in a rectangle I could put down when it became too painful.

"Are you eating?" she asked every time.

"Yes."

"Liar."

"I am."

"What did you eat?"

I panicked.

"Food."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Very specific."

I laughed.

She smiled, and for one second the room in Canada disappeared. I was back on the wooden floor near her chair, sweating in Thai heat, listening to her complain about the fan.

Then the screen froze.

Her smile became pixels.

The call dropped.

And I was in Canada again.

The first snowfall I saw should have been beautiful.

Maybe it was.

Snow fell outside the classroom window in soft white pieces, and everyone else barely reacted.

To them, it was ordinary. To me, it looked like the sky was breaking quietly.

I pressed my hand against the cold glass.

A girl nearby smiled.

"First snow?"

I nodded.

She laughed kindly. "You'll hate it by February."

She was right.

At first, I took pictures. I sent them to Mali, to Niran, to Grandma. I walked carefully, amazed by footprints and white rooftops.

Then snow became slush.

Then slush entered my shoes.

Then the sidewalks turned into grey rivers at intersections.

Then the wind hit my face so hard my eyes watered and I thought, This country is trying to humble me.

Winter made everyone uglier and more honest. People stopped dressing for beauty and started dressing for survival. Jackets became armor. Boots became personality. Scarves hid half of every face. On buses, strangers fogged the windows with their breathing, pressed shoulder to shoulder while pretending they were alone.

I began to understand that Canada was not cold because Canadians lacked warmth.

Maybe Canadians were polite because the weather had already taken so much energy from them.

Still, politeness did not save me from loneliness.

I missed being known.

Not famous. Not admired.

Known.

In Thailand, people knew whose grandson I was. They knew my bad inventions, my painted walls, my friends, my grandmother's temper, my mother's absence, my father's silence.

Sometimes I hated that everyone knew everything.

In Canada, nobody knew anything.

At school, I was the new kid from Thailand.

At home, I was the son who needed to be corrected.

In my own mind, I was becoming a translation of myself.

Close, but not exact.

One day during class, the teacher asked us to write a short paragraph about home.

Everyone started writing quickly.

I stared at the blank page.

Home.

What was I supposed to write?

Thailand?

Grandma's house?

Canada?

My mother's apartment?

The place I slept?

The place I missed?

The place that hurt less?

My pencil hovered over the paper.

Inside my head, a younger version of me ran barefoot down a dirt road, laughing, not knowing he would one day be asked to define something he had lost.

I wrote one sentence.

Home is where people remember who you were before you changed.

Then I stopped.

The teacher later wrote, "Beautiful line," in red pen.

I looked at the comment for a long time.

I did not feel proud.

I felt exposed.

Because I had not been trying to be beautiful.

I had been trying not to cry.

By the end of that first year, my English improved. My grades were good. Teachers praised me.

My mother told relatives I was doing well.

Doing well.

That phrase followed me like a costume.

Abe is doing well.

Abe studies hard.

Abe is adjusting.

Abe has a better future now.

I wanted to ask, If I am doing well, why do I feel like I am disappearing?

But nobody asked that kind of question.

So I became quieter.

More careful.

I learned which parts of myself were inconvenient in Canada.

Too emotional. Hide it.

Too foreign. Smooth it out.

Too lonely. Call it focus.

Too hurt. Call it discipline.

I did not understand then that this was how walls began.

Not all at once.

Not with some dramatic vow under rain.

Walls were built from small decisions.

Don't say that.

Don't cry.

Don't ask for help.

Don't miss people too loudly.

Don't make your mother angry.

Don't let classmates see you confused.

Don't need anything.

Brick by brick, I became easier to praise and harder to know.

And Canada, with its snow, streetlights, polite strangers, late buses, Tim Hortons coffee, and endless grey mornings, became the place where I learned one of the most dangerous lessons of my life.

You could survive by becoming less visible.

For a while, I thought that was strength.

I did not know yet how much it would cost me.

Chapter 4 — The Language of Footsteps

People think violence has to be loud.

A slammed door.

A broken plate.

A hand raised in the air.

A scream sharp enough for neighbors to hear.

But some violence enters the body quietly.

It comes as a sentence repeated every day until it becomes your own thought.

It comes as a sigh from the kitchen.

A look across the table.

A question that is not really a question.

Why are you like this?

What is wrong with you?

Do you think anyone will tolerate you?

It comes in the morning before school, when you are still half-asleep and trying to pour cereal without making too much noise.

It comes at night when your textbook is open, your eyes are burning, and someone decides your silence is attitude.

That was the kind of house I lived in.

Not always shouting.

That would have been easier to explain.

If someone had asked, "Is your mother abusive?" I don't know if I would have known how to answer.

She fed me.

She worked.

She paid bills.

She told people she wanted the best for me.

She did not hit me every day. She did not lock me outside. She did not starve me.

So for a long time, I told myself it was not abuse.

It was stress.

It was culture.

It was sacrifice.

It was discipline.

It was because she was tired.

It was because Canada was hard.

It was because I was difficult.

That last one was the most dangerous.

Once a child starts believing pain is proof of their own defect, they stop looking for exits and start looking for ways to become smaller.

I became smaller slowly.

At first, I still talked back.

Not disrespectfully. At least, I didn't think so. I tried to explain myself the way teachers taught us to explain answers in school: with reasons, evidence, logic.

If she said I was lazy, I listed what I had done that day.

School. Homework. Dishes. Laundry. Studying.

If she said I did not care, I tried to prove I did.

If she said I was ungrateful, I reminded her that I knew she worked hard.

This never helped.

Explanations only gave her more surface to strike.

"You always have an answer."

"I'm just explaining."

"You think I'm stupid?"

"No."

"Then why do you argue?"

"I'm not arguing."

"There. That tone."

My tone.

My face.

My posture.

My silence.

Everything could betray me.

I learned that words did not mean the same thing at home as they did outside.

At school, words were tools. You used them to answer questions, write essays, ask for help, make jokes, explain ideas.

At home, words were traps.

Anything I said could become evidence.

If I said, “I’m tired,” it meant I was lazy.

If I said, “I forgot,” it meant I did not care.

If I said, “I don’t know,” it meant I was useless.

If I said nothing, it meant I had attitude.

So I began studying another language.

Not English.

Not Thai.

The language of footsteps.

There was another sound I learned to fear.

Bottles.

Not the first one.

The first one was almost normal. A cap twisting open. Glass touching the counter. Liquid pouring into a cup.

The first one meant the evening had started.

The second one meant I should become careful.

The third one meant the house no longer belonged to reason.

My mother drank in a way that changed the air before it changed her voice. At first, she became louder. Then sharper. Then cruel in a way that felt almost rehearsed, like every kind thought had been locked outside and only the worst ones were allowed to speak.

Sometimes she cried.

Sometimes she laughed.

Sometimes she looked at me like I had personally ruined her life by existing.

"You don't know what I sacrificed," she would say.

I heard that sentence so often it became part of the furniture.

I did not know what to do with it.

Was I supposed to apologize for being born?

Was I supposed to thank her while she cut me open with words?

My stepfather made the house colder in a different way.

He was the kind of man who could smile at strangers, hold a door open, say thank you to a cashier, and then come home carrying hatred like it was a normal opinion.

He called it politics.

I learned early that some people used that word when they wanted cruelty to sound intellectual.

He admired strength, but only the kind that looked like domination. He talked about blood, heritage, weakness, order, decay. He said things about immigrants, Asians, Jews, Black people, anyone who did not fit inside the small violent map of the world he carried in his head.

And there I was.

Eurasian.

Thai. Chinese. Irish. Canadian by paperwork, foreign by feeling, mixed in a way that made people ask questions before they knew my name.

In his house, my body itself felt like an argument.

He did not always need to say it directly.

That was the worst part.

Sometimes the hatred came sideways.

A comment during the news.

A joke at dinner.

A look when I spoke.

A sentence about "people like that" while I sat close enough to understand exactly what he meant.

I would stare at my plate and feel my face go still.

Do not react.

Do not give him anything.

Do not become the target tonight.

My mother heard him.

Sometimes she ignored it.

Sometimes she laughed.

Sometimes, if she had been drinking, she joined him in whatever direction the cruelty was moving.

That confused me more than anything.

How could someone who gave birth to me sit beside someone who hated pieces of what I was?

For a long time, I tried to solve that question.

Then I realized there was no answer that would not break something in me.

So I stopped asking.

The house became a place where I learned to split myself into pieces.

At school, I was the quiet smart kid.

At work, later, I would become reliable.

Online, I tried to sound normal.

At home, I became invisible.

I hid my reactions. I hid my opinions. I hid my anger so deeply that sometimes I could not find it when I needed it.

But it was there.

Every slur disguised as a joke.

Every drunken accusation.

Every reminder that I was weak, ungrateful, destined to fail.

Every night I sat in my room listening to bottles, footsteps, and voices through the wall.

The anger did not disappear.

It became fuel.

Not clean fuel. Not heroic fuel.

The kind that burns dirty and keeps you alive anyway.

By seventeen, I no longer dreamed of being understood.

I dreamed of a locked door.

A room where no one drank themselves into cruelty.

A dinner table where my existence was not debated.

A life where I did not have to shrink every time someone spoke about blood like it mattered more than kindness.

That was when leaving stopped being a fantasy.

It became survival.

My mother's footsteps sounded different depending on her mood.

Fast and sharp meant I should prepare myself.

Slow and heavy meant anger had been sitting inside her for a while.

Cabinet doors closing too hard meant she was irritated but had not yet chosen a target.

Silence in the kitchen was the worst.

Silence meant she was thinking.

And if she was thinking, eventually she would think of me.

I could be in my room with headphones on, listening to a recorded lecture, pencil in hand, trying to understand algebra or physics or English literature, and still part of my mind would remain outside my door.

Listening.

Always listening.

That was the exhausting part.

People thought I was focused because I studied a lot.

I was not focused.

I was split.

Half of me studied.

The other half monitored the house.

A normal evening looked simple from the outside.

A teenage boy at his desk.

A textbook open.

A laptop glowing.

Snow tapping lightly against the window.

The hum of the apartment heating system.

Maybe a cup of instant noodles beside him because he was too tired to cook anything else.

But inside me, nothing was simple.

Did I wash the dish properly?

Did I leave my shoes in the wrong place?

Did I forget to answer her message?

Was my grade high enough?

Did I sound annoyed earlier?

Should I apologize before she brings it up?

What if apologizing reminds her?

What if not apologizing makes it worse?

I thought like a lawyer defending a client who was always guilty.

The client was me.

Sometimes, she would enter my room without knocking.

I hated that most.

The door would open and my body would react before my mind did. Shoulders tight. Spine straight. Face empty.

She would look around as if searching for something wrong.

“Why is this here?”

“It’s for school.”

“You call this clean?”

“I cleaned yesterday.”

“So now you’re done forever?”

“No.”

“You live like this and expect to succeed?”

I would look at the floor.

There was usually nothing terrible. A hoodie on the chair. Papers on the desk. A cup I had not brought to the sink yet. Normal teenage mess.

But in her mouth, normal things became moral failures.

A cup was not a cup.

It was proof I was careless.

A hoodie was not a hoodie.

It was proof I had no discipline.

A tired face was not a tired face.

It was proof I was weak.

The strange thing was that I believed her and did not believe her at the same time.

Part of me knew other people lived differently. I saw it when classmates talked about home.

"My mom made pasta last night."

"My dad drove me to practice."

"My parents are annoying, but whatever."

They said these things casually, as if family was background noise. Something irritating but stable. Something you complained about because you trusted it would still be there.

I listened and smiled.

I did not know how to enter those conversations.

What was I supposed to say?

My mother called me useless because I forgot to take chicken out of the freezer?

My house feels like a courtroom where I am always on trial?

I miss my disabled grandmother in Thailand more than I know how to explain?

So I said nothing.

Silence became my safest outfit.

At school, teachers liked me.

That helped and hurt at the same time.

They said I was polite.

Hardworking.

Mature.

Responsible.

Such a good student.

Every compliment felt like warm water poured over frostbite. Painful before it was comforting.

I wanted to believe them.

But praise did not stick easily to someone who had been trained to reject himself.

A teacher once returned an essay with a high mark and wrote, "You have a strong voice."

I stared at that comment for a long time.

A strong voice.

I almost laughed.

If only she knew how little I used it.

Grades became the one place where reality could not be rewritten.

If I got a ninety-two, no one could say it was a seventy.

If I solved the problem correctly, no one could claim I had not tried.

School was not easy, but it was fairer than home.

That made me love it in a desperate way.

I started treating education like a rope thrown into a pit.

Every assignment was another grip.

Every exam was another pull upward.

Every good grade whispered, Maybe you are not what she says.

But the whisper never lasted long.

At home, her voice was louder.

"You got ninety?"

"Yes."

"What happened to the other ten?"

She said it like a joke sometimes.

That made it harder.

If I looked hurt, I was too sensitive.

If I laughed, the joke became normal.

So I smiled.

A small smile.

The kind that took more effort than crying.

Inside, something folded.

I became obsessed with being correct.

Not good.

Correct.

Good was too vague. Good could still be criticized. Correct had evidence.

I checked assignments three times before submitting them. I rewrote paragraphs until the words stopped looking real. I memorized instructions, rubrics, deadlines, teacher preferences. I tried to build a version of myself so precise no one could find an opening.

But people who want to hurt you do not need openings.

They make them.

One evening, I came home late from school because the bus had been delayed. It was winter, and the city had turned into grey slush. My socks were damp. My backpack felt too heavy. The TTC had announced some signal problem that made everyone on the platform sigh like a single tired organism.

When I opened the apartment door, I knew immediately.

Silence.

Not peaceful silence.

Waiting silence.

My mother stood in the kitchen.

“Where were you?”

“The bus was late.”

“You didn’t text.”

“My phone died.”

“Convenient.”

I took off my shoes carefully.

“It did.”

“You think I’m stupid?”

There it was again.

The question with no safe answer.

“No.”

“You come home whenever you want now?”

“No.”

“You think because this is Canada, you can do whatever?”

"I was at school."

She laughed once.

Cold.

"Always excuses."

I stood near the door with my wet socks and heavy bag and felt something inside me detach.

Not break.

Detach.

Like my mind stepped away from my body and watched from the corner of the room.

There is Abe, I thought.

Abe is tired.

Abe is cold.

Abe should not cry.

Abe should say sorry.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?"

My mouth opened.

I didn't know.

That was another trap.

If I apologized, I had to name the crime. If I could not name it, the apology was fake.

"For not texting," I said.

"And?"

For existing incorrectly, I thought.

"For making you worry."

She looked at me for a long moment.

Then she turned away.

"Go study."

So I did.

I went to my room.

I changed my socks.

I opened my textbook.

The words blurred.

Something in my chest hurt so badly I pressed my fist against it, as if I could hold myself together from the outside.

Don't cry.

Study.

Don't cry.

Study.

Don't cry.

Study.

That was how I survived many nights.

Not with courage.

With commands.

I became my own prison guard.

Wake up.

Go to school.

Get good grades.

Come home.

Do chores.

Be quiet.

Study.

Sleep.

Do not need kindness.

Do not expect apology.

Do not make mistakes.

Do not make noise.

Do not be a burden.

And beneath all those commands, one hidden sentence grew stronger every year.

Get out.

At first, it was not a plan.

It was a fantasy.

I imagined having my own room somewhere else. A door no one opened without permission. A kitchen where a plate was just a plate. A night where silence meant rest, not danger.

I imagined buying groceries with my own money.

Locking my own door.

Choosing when to sleep.

Choosing who could speak to me.

The fantasy was not glamorous.

No mansion.

No sports car.

No luxury condo above Toronto with glass walls and a view of the CN Tower.

Just peace.

A small room.

A desk.

A bed.

Quiet that belonged to me.

That was the dream.

But dreams cost money.

And money was where fantasy met Canada.

Rent in Toronto was not a number. It was a threat.

Even as a teenager, I understood that leaving would not be simple. First and last month. Transit.

Food. Phone. School. Clothes. Winter boots. Emergencies. The city charged you for survival in installments.

Every time I looked at rental listings, I felt both hope and humiliation.

Basement room. Shared kitchen. Students preferred.

Small room near transit. No guests.

Quiet tenant wanted.

Quiet.

That word again.

I was qualified for quiet.

I had been trained.

But before I could leave, I had to endure.

So I endured by becoming excellent.

Not because excellence made me happy.

Because it made me harder to dismiss.

I studied while other people went out.

I memorized while other people slept.

I treated every test like a small court case where I could finally prove my innocence.

Sometimes classmates asked, "Why do you care so much?"

I never knew how to answer.

Because if I fail, I have nowhere soft to land.

Because if I am not useful, I am nothing.

Because one day I will need enough money to leave, and grades are the only door I can reach right now.

Because I want a life where no one can speak to me like this again.

Instead, I shrugged.

"I just want good marks."

They accepted that.

People usually accept the simplest explanation because it asks the least from them.

Years passed like that.

Toronto became familiar, but not gentle.

I learned the subway lines. I learned where people stood on platforms. I learned that everyone hated winter but bragged about surviving it. I learned that Canadians could discuss weather with the seriousness of politics. I learned that "sorry" could mean apology, sympathy, annoyance, or please move.

I learned how to blend in.

My English improved.

My grades stayed high.

Teachers trusted me.

Students knew me as quiet, smart, maybe a little intense.

At home, my mother still found ways to make me feel like a failed draft of a person.

The worst part was not that she hated me.

I don't think she did.

The worst part was that sometimes she was kind.

She bought food I liked.

She asked about school.

She told relatives I was smart.

She worried when I was sick.

Those moments confused me more than cruelty.

If she had been cruel all the time, I could have made her a villain and escaped cleanly inside my own mind.

But she was human.

Tired. Wounded. Angry. Capable of sacrifice. Capable of tenderness. Capable of saying things that stayed in my body for years.

That complexity trapped me.

Because every time I wanted to call it abuse, another voice said: But she worked hard.

But she fed you.

But she sacrificed.

But other people have it worse.

But she loves you in her own way.

Maybe that was true.

Maybe it wasn't.

Maybe love that constantly makes a child feel worthless is still love, but damaged beyond usefulness.

I did not know.

I only knew how I felt.

Afraid.

Small.

Lonely.

Tired.

And guilty for feeling all of it.

By the time I turned seventeen, the fantasy of leaving had become a plan.

I began saving whatever I could.

Small amounts.

Embarrassing amounts.

Money from work.

Money from odd jobs.

Money I did not spend on food with friends, because I usually said I was busy anyway.

Every dollar became a brick in the wall between me and that apartment.

Sometimes I would look at my balance and feel proud for five seconds.

Then rent prices would remind me I was still far away.

But I kept saving.

Because the alternative was staying.

And staying felt like disappearing slowly in a room where everyone insisted I was fine.

One night, after another argument I could barely remember because they all began to sound the same, I sat on the floor of my room with my back against the bed.

The lights were off.

My laptop was open beside me, lecture paused.

Outside the window, Toronto glowed cold and distant. Somewhere below, a streetcar moved through the dark with a metallic groan. People were going home. People were leaving work.

People were buying coffee. People were living inside rooms I would never see.

I pressed my palms against my eyes.

I thought of Grandma.

Her trembling hand.

Her voice saying, Your face is loud.

I thought of Mali under the temple trees.

Don't become someone else.

I thought of the boy on the bicycle, dragging a broken trailer house into a ditch and calling failure a prototype.

Where did he go?

The question opened something in me.

For years, I had been trying to become smaller so pain would pass over me.

But that boy had never been small.

Ridiculous, yes.

Reckless, yes.

Bad at engineering, definitely.

But not small.

He built things out of scraps because he believed the world could be rearranged.

Sitting on the floor in that dark room, I realized I missed him.

Not Thailand.

Not childhood.

Him.

The version of me who still tried.

A thought came then, quiet but clear.

I am not staying here forever.

It was not dramatic.

No music swelled.

No lightning flashed over Toronto.

I did not suddenly become fearless.

I was still tired. Still broke. Still hurt. Still young.

But something shifted.

The command inside me changed.

Not just survive.

Leave.

Build.

Become someone she cannot define.

I wiped my face, turned the light on, and opened my laptop again.

The lecture resumed mid-sentence.

The professor's voice filled the room as if nothing had happened.

I picked up my pencil.

My hand was shaking.

I kept writing anyway.

Because I had finally understood something.

If home could become a place that broke me, then maybe one day I could build a place that didn't.

And if no one was coming to save me, I would have to become the first person who tried.

Chapter 5 — No One Came to the Door

When I left home at eighteen, no one stopped me.

That was the part I did not know how to explain.

People imagine leaving an abusive home as something dramatic. A final argument. A slammed door. Someone crying in the hallway. Someone begging you to stay. Someone realizing, too late, that they had pushed you past the edge.

That did not happen.

No one blocked the door.

No one grabbed my wrist.

No one said, "Wait."

No one asked where I would sleep, how much money I had, whether I owned a proper winter jacket, whether I had eaten that day, whether I was scared.

No one asked if I was leaving because I wanted freedom or because staying had become impossible.

The apartment was almost normal that morning.

That was what made it cruel.

The kitchen smelled faintly of old alcohol, dish soap, and reheated food. A bottle sat near the counter, not hidden, not displayed, just present in the way certain things became part of the room if everyone agreed not to name them. My stepfather's boots were by the door. Heavy. Mud dried around the soles. They looked like they belonged to someone who expected the floor to tolerate him.

My mother moved around the kitchen without looking at my bags.

One duffel.

One backpack.

One plastic bag filled with things I could not fit anywhere else.

That was my life at eighteen.

Not much to show for surviving.

I stood near the entrance with my coat on, sweating slightly because I had dressed too early. My room behind me was nearly empty, but not empty enough to matter. A few hangers in the closet.

Dust under the bed. Marks on the wall where furniture had been. Nothing sentimental enough for anyone to notice.

I had imagined this moment for years.

Not happily.

Just constantly.

During arguments, I imagined it.

During silent dinners, I imagined it.

During nights when bottles opened one after another and the air in the apartment changed, I imagined it.

When my stepfather said things about race and blood and weakness, when his politics filled the room like smoke and I sat there mixed in ways his worldview hated, I imagined it.

When my mother reminded me I was ungrateful, weak, difficult, too sensitive, destined to fail, I imagined it.

A door.

A key.

A room somewhere else.

Quiet that belonged to me.

For years, leaving had been a glowing exit sign inside my head.

But when the day came, it did not glow.

It just cost money.

First month's rent.

Last month's rent.

Phone bill.

Transit.

Groceries.

Laundry.

A mattress.

A desk if I could find one cheap.

A chair if my back wanted dignity.

I had written the numbers down so many times they felt tattooed behind my eyes. Every dollar had a purpose before I even touched it. Every purchase had to defend itself in court.

Do I need this?

Can it wait?

What happens if it waits too long?

Moving out was not freedom first.

It was math.

My mother glanced at my bags once.

"You really think you can survive out there?"

Her voice was not worried.

That was important.

There was no softness under it. No hidden fear. No trembling motherhood trying to disguise itself as criticism.

It was almost bored.

Like she was watching someone make a predictable mistake.

"I'll manage," I said.

"You always think you know everything."

I did not answer.

That was another skill I had learned too well.

Silence as shield.

Silence as surrender.

Silence as the only language that did not immediately become evidence against me.

She turned back toward the counter.

My stepfather did not come out to say goodbye.

Maybe he was asleep.

Maybe he heard me and did not care.

Maybe my leaving was so small to him that it did not deserve footsteps.

Part of me was relieved.

Part of me was furious.

Not because I wanted him to care. I didn't. Not really.

But there was something humiliating about realizing you could disappear from a house that had taken so much from you, and the house would not even pause.

I lifted the duffel bag.

It was heavier than I expected.

For a moment, I waited.

I do not know for what.

An apology, maybe.

A question.

A crack in the story.

A sign that someone understood this was not normal.

That a boy should not have to leave like a tenant whose lease had ended.

My mother opened a cabinet.

A plate shifted.

The sound was ordinary.

That was when I understood.

No one was coming to the door.

So I opened it myself.

The hallway smelled like old carpet and someone's cooking. I stepped out and closed the door behind me as quietly as I could.

Not because I cared about disturbing them.

Because even leaving, I was still trained to make no noise.

The click of the latch sounded too small.

I stood there for a second, staring at the closed door.

I expected grief to hit me.

Instead, I felt nothing.

That scared me more.

The building hallway stretched ahead, dull and fluorescent, with scratches on the walls and a recycling notice taped near the elevator. Somewhere, a television played behind another door.

Someone laughed faintly. A child shouted. Life continued with cruel confidence.

I thought, This is it?

Years of fear.

Years of listening.

Years of shrinking.

Years of telling myself, Just get out.

And the moment itself was a hallway with bad lighting.

I carried my bags downstairs because waiting for the elevator felt too vulnerable. The duffel slammed against my leg with every step. My backpack dug into my shoulders. By the time I reached the lobby, my hand hurt from gripping the plastic bag.

Outside, Toronto was grey.

Of course it was.

The sky looked undecided. Snow from earlier in the week had turned into dirty ridges along the sidewalk. Cars hissed over wet pavement. A bus groaned past the stop without me, which felt personal even though the TTC had been disappointing people long before I was born.

I stood on the sidewalk with everything I owned and realized no one in the city knew what had just happened.

To everyone else, I was just a young guy with too many bags.

Maybe a student.

Maybe someone moving rooms.

Maybe someone going somewhere.

Not someone escaping.

That was the strange thing about pain.

From inside your body, it could feel enormous.

From the outside, it could look like luggage.

I took the next bus.

No one offered to help with my bags.

That was not cruel. It was normal. People had their own lives, their own exhaustion, their own rent, their own grief packed into backpacks and winter coats.

A woman moved her purse so I could sit. I thanked her. She nodded without looking at me.

That tiny kindness almost broke me.

Not because it was big.

Because it asked for nothing.

The bus windows were fogged from everyone's breathing. Salt stains marked the floor. A teenager near the back played music too loudly through cheap headphones. An old man held a grocery bag between his boots. A construction worker closed his eyes and leaned his head against the glass as if the bus was the only rest he would get all day.

Canada lived like that.

Tired, polite, expensive.

Everyone trying not to collapse in public.

I watched the city pass through the blurred window and thought of Thailand.

Not clearly.

That hurt too.

The memories were already becoming soft around the edges.

The tree house leaned inside my mind, but I could not remember exactly how the ladder felt under my hands. I remembered Mali's laugh, but not every note of it. I remembered Grandma's chair, the medicine bottles, the smell of herbs, but some days her face came to me in pieces.

I hated Canada for that.

I hated time more.

The room I rented was in a basement of an old house that looked tired of winter. The landlord met me at the door and gave me rules before warmth.

Laundry once a week.

No guests.

Keep the kitchen clean.

Quiet after ten.

Garbage day is Tuesday.

Students preferred.

I nodded at everything.

I was good at being preferred by strangers.

Quiet.

Clean.

Responsible.

Low-risk.

The room itself was small. A narrow window near the ceiling. White walls. A closet door that stuck halfway. The floor was cold even through my socks. It smelled faintly of dust and old paint.

But no one had screamed in it yet.

That made it beautiful.

I put my bags down.

The sound echoed slightly.

Then there was silence.

Real silence.

No bottles.

No footsteps to decode.

No voice waiting to turn my face into a problem.

No stepfather talking about blood and weakness from the other room.

No mother deciding my existence had disappointed her before I opened my mouth.

Just silence.

I stood in the middle of the room and waited for relief.

It came slowly.

Not like joy.

More like a muscle unclenching after being tight for years.

My shoulders dropped.

My jaw hurt because I had been clenching it.

I sat on the floor because I did not have a chair yet.

Then I laughed once.

A strange, empty laugh.

“I did it,” I whispered.

The room did not congratulate me.

That felt honest.

Freedom, I learned quickly, was not emotional.

Freedom was practical.

Freedom was realizing toilet paper did not appear by itself.

Freedom was comparing dish soap at Dollarama because one brand was fifty cents cheaper.

Freedom was learning that a laundry basket mattered more than you thought.

Freedom was buying a cheap mattress and pretending it was comfortable because comfort had not made the budget.

Freedom was checking your bank account before buying toothpaste.

Freedom was rice, eggs, pasta, canned tuna, frozen vegetables, and bananas because berries were for people with family support.

Freedom was looking at chicken and thinking, Maybe next week.

At eighteen, grocery stores became classrooms.

No Frills taught me humility.

Dollarama taught me strategy.

Shoppers Drug Mart taught me anger.

Why is deodorant seven dollars?

Why does being clean cost this much?

Why does every small human need have a price tag?

I began packing lunches for work because buying food outside felt like betrayal. Rice and eggs.

Rice and tuna. Pasta with sauce from a jar. Leftovers in plastic containers that made my bag smell faintly like survival.

I worked full-time because part-time was not enough to stand on.

Work gave me structure. Hours. Tasks. Expectations. A place where effort could become money, and money could become distance from the life I left.

Later, I became an electrical assembly technician.

The title meant more to me than anyone understood.

It was not glamorous. It did not sound like the dream people clap for in movies. But it was stable. Real. Skilled. Something I could build on.

Wires, tools, parts, drawings, processes.

Things had to connect properly.

That made sense to me.

People did not always connect properly.

Families did not.

Love did not.

But wires either carried current or they didn't. Assemblies either passed inspection or they needed rework. Mistakes could be found. Fixed. Tested again.

There was mercy in that.

At work, I became useful.

Reliable.

Careful.

The kind of person supervisors trusted because I showed up, listened, learned, and did not make excuses.

People thought that was discipline.

It was partly fear.

Fear of going back.

Fear of needing help.

Fear of proving my mother right.

When I got my first stable full-time paycheck, I stared at it on my phone for a long time.

It was not a fortune.

Rent still waited with its mouth open.

Tuition still existed like a threat.

Groceries still had to be negotiated with.

But that paycheck came from my hands.

My time.

My endurance.

My proof.

For one stupid moment, I wanted to tell my mother.

That was the embarrassing part of healing.

You could know someone was unsafe and still want them to become proud.

I called her.

I told her about the job.

There was a pause.

Then she said, “Don’t lie.”

I blinked.

“I’m not lying.”

“You? Full-time and stable?” She laughed. “You always exaggerate.”

The room around me became very quiet.

Not peaceful this time.

Cold.

“I’m telling the truth,” I said.

“You think one job means you survived?” she said. “You’re not destined to survive, Abe. You don’t understand life. You’ll see.”

For years, I had imagined success as a key.

A good grade would unlock pride.

A job would unlock respect.

Money would unlock peace.

Proof would unlock love.

But in that moment, holding the phone to my ear in the room I paid for, wearing work clothes I had bought myself, with school notes open on my desk and groceries in the small fridge, I finally understood.

Some doors are not locked.

They are walls.

You can knock forever.

No one will open because there was never a door there.

I looked at the amulet from Grandma sitting beside my laptop.

For protection.

Maybe protection did not always mean something stopped the pain before it reached you.

Maybe sometimes protection was the moment you stopped handing people the knife.

My mother kept talking.

I do not remember every word.

Only the feeling.

Old smallness trying to return.

Old shame reaching for my throat.

Old training telling me to explain, defend, prove, apologize.

But something else answered.

No.

Quietly.

Not angry.

Not dramatic.

Just no.

"I have to go," I said.

She was still speaking when I ended the call.

My hand shook afterward.

I hated that.

I wanted to be stronger than shaking.

But strength, I was learning, was not the absence of shaking.

Sometimes strength was shaking and still not calling back.

After that, contact faded.

Not in one clean cut.

Life rarely gives you clean cuts.

It was fewer calls.

Shorter replies.

Less information.

No more offering my achievements to be denied.

No more bringing my life to someone who needed me small.

Losing contact with my mother did not feel like freedom at first.

It felt like grief without a funeral.

Because she was alive.

Because I still knew her number.

Because some part of me still wanted a mother.

Not even my mother exactly.

Just a mother.

Someone to ask if I had eaten.

Someone to worry about my wet socks.

Someone to say, I knew you could do it.

Someone who did not make survival feel like an insult against her.

But wanting something does not make it real.

So I let the silence grow.

This time, it was not the silence of fear.

It was the silence of distance.

At night, I studied online at my cheap desk after work, my eyes burning while recorded lectures played through headphones. Discussion posts. Assignments. Quizzes. Business ideas scribbled in the margins.

Sometimes I was so tired I read the same sentence five times and understood none of it.

Sometimes I ate dinner standing up because sitting down felt like permission to collapse.

Sometimes I laughed at the absurdity of my life: eighteen, alone, broke, working full-time, studying online, trying to build a business, calculating whether I could afford fruit.

But beneath the exhaustion was something solid.

Mine.

The room was mine.

The bills were mine.

The mistakes were mine.

The future, uncertain and expensive and frightening, was mine.

No one had cared when I left.

No one came to the door.

No one asked if I was ready.

No one held my bags.

No one made sure I had enough.

For a long time, that truth hurt me.

Then slowly, it became something else.

Evidence.

If no one had cared and I still survived, then survival belonged to me.

Not to their belief.

Not to their approval.

Not to their permission.

Mine.

I thought again of the boy in Thailand who built a trailer house out of scraps and crashed it into a ditch.

Prototype one has failed.

He had laughed then.

I did not laugh as easily anymore.

But I was still building.

A room out of rent.

A future out of paychecks.

An education out of sleepless nights.

A business out of margins, notes, and stubbornness.

A self out of everything they said would not survive.

Maybe no one came to the door because no one understood what leaving meant.

Or maybe they understood and simply did not care.

Either way, I had opened it myself.

And for the first time in my life, the closed door behind me did not feel like rejection.

It felt like proof that I had made it out.

Chapter 6 — Prototype One Has Failed

For a while, I did not know I was getting better.

That was the strange thing.

Healing did not announce itself.

It did not arrive one morning with sunlight through the window and a clean dramatic feeling in my chest. It did not make me forgive everyone. It did not erase the old voices. It did not turn me into someone soft and fearless.

It was smaller than that.

One day, I came home from work, took off my boots, and realized I was not afraid of the silence.

That was all.

The room was still small. Rent was still rude. My desk was still cheap. My laundry still hung from a rack because I refused to pay for the dryer unless absolutely necessary.

But the silence had changed.

At first, it had felt empty.

Then slowly, without asking my permission, it became peaceful.

No bottles opening.

No footsteps to decode.

No voice waiting to turn my face into a crime.

No stepfather talking about blood and weakness from another room.

No mother reminding me I was not destined to survive.

Just the hum of the heater.

The small buzz of my laptop.

The city outside my window.

My own breathing.

I sat on the edge of my bed and listened to nothing.

Then I smiled.

It felt strange on my face.

Like an old tool I had forgotten how to use.

After moving out, life did not become easy. It became mine, which was different. Sometimes mine was exhausting. Sometimes mine was lonely. Sometimes mine meant eating the same meal three days in a row and pretending I had invented minimalism.

But mine also meant I could stop at a café after work if I had a few dollars spare.

Mine meant I could walk through the city without explaining where I was going.

Mine meant I could leave a cup on my desk overnight and no one would use it as evidence that I was fundamentally defective.

That sounds small.

It was not small to me.

The first time I realized I was enjoying life again, I was standing outside a Tim Hortons with a coffee in one hand and snow falling lightly around me.

Not beautiful movie snow.

Toronto snow.

Wet, inconvenient, already planning to become slush.

The TTC was delayed. Of course it was. A streetcar groaned somewhere down the road like it was tired of being Canadian. People stood around me in winter coats, faces hidden by scarves, everyone silently united by public transit disappointment.

And I felt... okay.

Not happy in a loud way.

Not healed.

Just okay.

I took a sip of coffee that was too hot and not very good, and somehow that made me laugh.

I laughed because I had become one of them.

One of the tired people standing in the cold, drinking mediocre coffee, complaining internally about the TTC, calculating dinner, rent, and tomorrow's shift.

Canada had not become gentle.

But it had become familiar.

That mattered.

Work helped.

The electrical assembly job gave my days a skeleton. I needed that. Without structure, my thoughts wandered into places I did not want to visit. With work, I had tasks. Parts. Tools.

Processes. Drawings. Corrections. Small improvements that added up if I paid attention.

I liked building things with my hands.

Maybe I always had.

As a child, I built tree houses that leaned dangerously and bicycle-powered trailer homes that collapsed into ditches. As an adult, I worked with wires, assemblies, and components that had to be right. There was no room for pretending a bad connection was good because I wanted it to be. No room for calling a mistake discipline. No room for someone rewriting reality depending on their mood.

If something failed, you found the failure.

If something was loose, you fixed it.

If something did not pass, you reworked it.

There was honesty in that.

Sometimes I wished people came with wiring diagrams.

At work, I learned patience in a practical way. Strip carefully. Crimp properly. Check the drawing.

Confirm the part. Do not rush because rushing creates problems that take longer to fix.

I thought about that more than I expected.

Maybe my life was like that too.

Years of bad connections.

Missing support.

Damaged insulation.

Pressure in the wrong places.

No wonder I had shorted out so many times.

But if a harness could be reworked, maybe so could a person.

I did not say things like that out loud, obviously.

I was still me.

Instead, I showed up.

I worked.

I studied.

I built.

Online university was still brutal. Every lecture competed with exhaustion. Every assignment demanded a version of my brain work had already spent. Sometimes I watched a recording at midnight with dinner beside me, pausing every few minutes to write notes I could barely read later.

There were nights I hated it.

Not in a dramatic way.

In a quiet, practical way.

The kind of hate that comes from being tired and knowing quitting would only make things worse.

“Why am I doing this?” I asked myself once, staring at a problem set after work.

The answer came immediately.

Because you cannot go back.

That was true, but it was not enough anymore.

For a long time, fear had pushed me forward. Fear of failure. Fear of needing someone. Fear of becoming the version of me my mother predicted.

But fear was heavy fuel.

It burned, yes.

But it left smoke inside me.

Eventually, I needed something else.

That was when the business ideas returned.

At first, they came as notes in the margins of schoolwork.

A service concept here.

A product idea there.

A problem I noticed at work.

A better way to organize a process.

A thought about customers.

A name.

A rough sketch.

A bad logo.

Then another.

Then another.

The notebook became crowded.

I would sit at my desk after work, still wearing my work pants, hair messy, eyes tired, and draw little systems no one had asked for. Some were stupid. Some were impossible. Some only made sense at 1 a.m., which meant they made no sense at all.

But I loved them.

They reminded me of the boy in Thailand who looked at scrap wood and saw a tree house, who looked at a rusted trailer frame and saw mobile real estate, who looked at a wall and painted himself standing on a dog-eyed tiger.

That boy had been ridiculous.

I missed him.

One night, while reviewing a business idea that was clearly not going to work, I wrote at the top of the page: Prototype one has failed.

Then I stopped.

The words pulled something from memory so suddenly I almost heard my friends laughing.

The ditch.

The broken trailer.

My hands still on the bicycle handlebars.

Dust in the air.

My friends laughing so hard they could barely breathe.

Back then, failure did not mean I was worthless.

It meant we had a story.

When did I forget that?

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the page.

For years, every mistake had felt like proof against me. A bad mark. A missed bus. A wrong word. A failed attempt. Everything carried the old threat: See? You can't survive.

But maybe failure was not always a verdict.

Maybe sometimes it was just information.

Prototype one has failed.

Build prototype two.

That sentence became dangerous.

In a good way.

I started treating my ideas less like tests of my worth and more like experiments. I researched after work. I made rough plans. I wrote down possible customers, costs, tools, risks, pricing, mistakes, next steps.

I did not have much money, so every idea had to face reality quickly.

Could I start this small?

Could I test it cheap?

Would anyone actually pay?

Was I solving a real problem or just trying to feel important?

That last question hurt sometimes.

Ambition can be honest, but it can also be a disguise.

Sometimes I did not know whether I wanted to build something valuable or prove I had value.

Maybe both.

The first attempt was ugly.

Most first attempts are.

I made a simple service offer. Too simple, maybe. I overthought the name, rewrote the description twelve times, adjusted the wording until it stopped sounding human, then sent it to a few potential customers with the terror of someone throwing a message in a bottle into the ocean.

No reply.

No reply.

No reply.

One polite rejection.

One person who said, "Interesting, but not for us."

I stared at that email like it had stabbed me.

Not for us.

Three words.

Professional. Normal. Harmless.

My body did not understand harmless.

My body heard rejection and prepared for humiliation.

See?

There it is.

You tried.

You failed.

You are exactly what she said.

I closed the laptop and walked around the room because sitting still felt dangerous. My chest was tight. My thoughts became cruel quickly, as if cruelty had been waiting by the door for an invitation.

Then I saw the notebook.

Prototype one has failed.

I picked up a pen.

Under the rejection, I wrote: Why?

Not why am I worthless?

Not why does life hate me?

Just why.

Wrong customer?

Weak offer?

Bad timing?

Poor explanation?

No trust?

Too expensive?

Too vague?

The question changed the shape of the failure.

It became something I could work with.

That was new.

I revised.

Tried again.

Failed again.

Revised again.

Some weeks felt like I was throwing effort into a hole. Work drained me. School demanded me.

Business mocked me. Rent hunted me. Groceries reminded me bananas were still the responsible fruit.

But life was no longer only survival.

That was the difference.

I had something I was building.

Even if it was small.

Even if it failed.

Even if no one understood why I cared so much.

A business, I learned, was less like a lightning strike and more like carrying bricks in the rain.

People loved talking about the moment something "took off." They liked success after it had become clean enough to photograph.

They did not see the drafts.

The awkward emails.

The spreadsheets.

The uncertainty.

The nights you wonder if you are ambitious or delusional.

The way one small customer can make you feel chosen by God and one quiet week can convince you the universe has blocked your number.

My first real customer did not look like destiny.

It was an email.

Short. Practical.

Someone had a problem. I had described something close enough to a solution. Could we talk?

I read the message three times.

Then a fourth.

Then I checked if it was spam.

It was not.

I sat very still.

The room around me looked the same. Cheap desk. Work clothes on the chair. Notes everywhere. Dirty bowl near the laptop. The amulet from Grandma beside the screen.

Nothing dramatic happened.

But inside me, something stood up.

A stranger had looked at something I made and decided it might be useful.

Useful.

That word meant a lot to me.

The call was terrifying.

I prepared too much. I wrote notes. Rehearsed answers. Checked my internet connection.

Drank water. Regretted drinking water. Opened the call window too early and stared at my own face on the screen.

You look tired, I thought.

Then another voice answered.

You are tired. Talk anyway.

The customer was normal. That helped and made it worse. If he had been rude, I could have hated him. If he had been impossible, I could have blamed him.

But he was just a person with a problem.

So I had to become a person with a solution.

My voice shook slightly at first. I hated that. Then the work part of my brain took over. Ask questions. Listen. Clarify. Don't oversell. Don't pretend. Be useful.

By the end of the call, he said, "Okay. Let's try it."

After we hung up, I stared at the screen.

Then I stood up.

Then I sat back down because I did not know what people did when their life changed by one small step.

I wanted to call someone.

Grandma.

But the time difference was bad.

My mother.

No.

That door was closed.

Mali.

No. That life had moved on.

So I sat alone with the news.

At first, that hurt.

Then I realized something.

Not every victory needed an audience to be real.

I opened my notebook and wrote: First customer.

The words looked small.

They were not.

That night, I bought dinner instead of cooking.

Nothing expensive. Just takeout from a place near the bus stop. I still checked the price twice and felt guilty ordering, but I did it anyway.

Celebration felt awkward.

Like wearing clothes that did not fit yet.

I carried the food back to my room, sat at my desk, and ate while watching snow fall against the small window.

For once, I did not study while eating.

For once, I did not work through dinner.

I just ate.

And I let myself feel proud.

Only a little.

But enough.

The business did not explode after that. Life is not that generous. One customer became stress.

Then learning. Then delivery. Then a mistake. Then a correction. Then another opportunity.

Prototype two.

Prototype three.

Prototype four.

Some failed.

Some worked.

Each one taught me something.

I became more careful with promises. More honest about timelines. Better at asking what people actually needed instead of what I wanted to sell. Better at separating criticism from attack. Better at hearing "no" without turning it into my mother's voice.

Not always.

But better.

And slowly, very slowly, I started enjoying the process.

That surprised me most.

I enjoyed building.

I enjoyed improving.

I enjoyed solving problems.

I enjoyed seeing an idea become something another person could use.

The boy from Thailand had not disappeared.

He had survived under layers of silence, fear, work clothes, spreadsheets, and winter jackets.

He was older now.

Less loud.

More careful.

But still there.

Still looking at scraps and imagining structures.

Still staring at failure and thinking, again.

One evening, after work, I walked through Toronto with no urgent reason. That was rare. Usually every step had purpose: bus stop, grocery store, laundromat, room, work, school.

But that evening, I let myself wander.

The city was lit with that soft early-night glow. Condo windows stacked above the streets like small private worlds. People moved in every direction. Students with backpacks. Office workers with tired faces. Couples holding hands. Someone carrying flowers. Someone yelling into a phone. A man outside Tim Hortons asking for change. A streetcar bell ringing. Steam rising from a vent in the sidewalk.

Toronto was not warm like Thailand.

It would never be.

But I understood it better now.

This city did not hug you.

It made you prove you could stand.

I used to resent that.

Maybe I still did.

But as I walked past shop windows and bus stops and people living lives I knew nothing about, I felt something I had not felt in a long time.

Possibility.

Not guaranteed happiness.

Not safety.

Possibility.

That was enough to keep building.

When I got home, I opened my notebook again.

The page was messy with crossed-out ideas, arrows, numbers, and half-formed plans.

At the top, I wrote a new sentence.

Prototype one has failed.

Then under it: Good. Now we know where to start.

I looked at those words for a long time.

Then I smiled.

Not the empty smile I used to wear at home.

Not the polite Canadian smile I had learned for strangers.

A real one.

Small.

Private.

Mine.

I was still tired.

Still healing.

Still broke more often than I wanted to admit.

Still carrying voices I had not fully silenced.

But I was building.

And for the first time, building did not feel like desperation alone.

It felt like returning.

Not to Thailand.

Not to childhood.

Not to the boy I used to be exactly.

But to the part of me that believed broken things could become something else if you were stubborn enough to pick up the pieces.

Maybe that was what my life was now.

Not a success story.

Not yet.

A prototype.

Flawed.

Unfinished.

Held together by effort, fear, hope, and cheap coffee.

But moving.

Finally moving.

Chapter 7 — The Life I Saved

Success did not arrive like victory.

It arrived like more work.

That was the first thing nobody told me.

People talk about success like it is a door you walk through. One day you are struggling, then something changes, and suddenly the room fills with light. Your problems shrink. Your old wounds close. The people who doubted you become background noise. You look in the mirror and finally recognize someone worth respecting.

That was not how it happened.

For me, success came in emails.

Invoices.

Missed lunches.

Long calls after work.

Customers who needed answers.

Customers who wanted discounts.

Customers who wanted miracles by Friday.

A calendar that filled faster than my ability to breathe.

The business grew slowly at first. Then it grew enough that I stopped trusting quiet weeks. One customer became three. Three became eight. Eight became enough to make me believe I was not imagining things.

Then came the strange part.

People started taking me seriously.

Not everyone. Not all at once. But enough.

A supplier remembered my name. A customer referred someone else. Someone older than me asked for my opinion and actually waited for the answer. A bank employee spoke to me like I had a future instead of like I was a child trying to play adult with numbers.

Respect came in pieces.

Tiny, sharp pieces.

I collected them carefully.

At work, I was still an electrical assembly technician. I still showed up, followed drawings, checked parts, used my hands, and built things that had to work. The job stayed steady, and the steadiness kept me grounded. I liked the honesty of it.

Wires did not care about my childhood.

Components did not ask if I felt ready.

Assemblies did not applaud me, but they did not lie either.

If something failed, you found the failure.

If something was loose, you fixed it.

If something did not pass, you reworked it.

There was mercy in that.

People were harder.

Families were harder.

Love was harder.

But work made sense.

After work, I built the business.

After business, I studied.

After studying, I slept.

Sometimes.

My life became efficient in a way that looked impressive from the outside and slightly inhuman from the inside.

Wake up.

Work.

Commute.

Eat.

Study.

Business.

Budget.

Sleep.

Repeat.

Improve.

Repeat.

Survive.

Repeat.

People called it discipline.

I let them.

It sounded better than fear.

Fear was less marketable.

Fear was the truth beneath everything. Fear was why I answered emails too quickly. Fear was why I checked invoices twice, then a third time. Fear was why I took every mistake personally, even when no one else did. Fear was why one quiet customer could make me feel abandoned and one complaint could ruin an entire night.

Fear had built a machine out of me.

The machine worked.

That was the problem.

When something broken produces results, people call it strength.

They do not ask what it costs to keep running.

The business gave me things I had once only imagined.

A better apartment.

Better food.

A desk that did not shake when I wrote.

A chair that supported my back instead of punishing it.

Winter boots that did not leak.

Groceries I could buy without calculating every single item like I was negotiating with a hostage taker.

The first time I bought berries without checking the price three times, I stood in the produce section with the plastic container in my hand and almost laughed.

Berries.

Such a stupid symbol.

But to me, they meant I had crossed some invisible line.

Bananas were survival.

Berries were choice.

I bought them.

Then I ate them slowly at my desk that night, one by one, like some rich villain from a cartoon.

"This is what power tastes like," I muttered to myself.

They were slightly sour.

Still worth it.

Those were the moments I enjoyed most. Not the big ones. The small ones that proved life had softened, even if I had not.

A warm apartment in February.

A proper meal after work.

A coffee I bought because I wanted it, not because I needed a table to sit at for two hours.

A Presto card with enough balance that I did not have to check before tapping.

A winter jacket chosen for comfort instead of desperation.

A quiet Sunday morning with laundry done, bills paid, and no one angry in the next room.

At first, peace felt like a luxury.

Then it became routine.

Then routine became dangerous.

Because once I no longer had to fight every minute to survive, the things I had buried began making noise.

Grandma's voice came back first.

Not literally.

Memory.

I would be washing a cup and suddenly hear her in my head.

"Don't make that face."

I would smile before I realized I was alone.

Then the smile would fade.

Calling her became harder as the years passed.

That sounds terrible.

Maybe it was.

It was not because I loved her less. It was because every call reminded me of everything distance had taken.

Her face on the screen looked smaller each time. The connection lagged. Her voice arrived late.

Sometimes she forgot what I had already told her. Sometimes I forgot what she had already asked.

"Are you eating?" she would say.

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes, Grandma."

"You look thin."

"I'm not."

"Liar."

Even through pixels, she knew.

I told her about work. About school. About the business, but only in simple pieces because explaining everything across time zones and bad signal felt impossible.

She nodded anyway.

"Good," she said. "Build something."

I looked down at my hands.

"I'm trying."

"You always try too hard."

That made me laugh.

Then the screen froze.

Her face held still mid-expression, mouth slightly open, eyes half narrowed.

For a few seconds, she looked like a photograph of someone already gone.

My chest tightened.

"Grandma?"

The call dropped.

I stared at my reflection in the black screen.

A successful young man, apparently.

Alone in a quiet apartment, holding a dead phone, missing a disabled old woman in Thailand who had raised him more honestly than anyone else.

Success did not know what to do with that.

Neither did I.

I thought success would give me enough time to go back.

That was the lie I told myself.

When I have more money.

When the business is stable.

When school is easier.

When work slows down.

When I can breathe.

When I can arrive as someone who made it.

I imagined walking back into the heat of Thailand with better clothes, better posture, better proof. I imagined kneeling beside her chair and placing my head near her trembling hand. I imagined telling her everything.

I made it, Grandma.

I got out.

I built something.

I survived.

I wanted her to see it.

Not because I needed applause.

Because some part of me still felt like the boy carrying rice to her chair, waiting for her to insult my face and love me at the same time.

But time does not wait for people who are busy surviving.

Grandma died before I could return the way I wanted to.

There was a call.

There is always a call.

A voice.

A pause.

A sentence that makes the world divide into before and after.

I do not remember exactly what was said first. I remember the feeling more than the words. My hand went cold around the phone. The apartment became too quiet. The city outside the window kept moving, which felt offensive.

Streetcars still ran.

People still bought coffee.

Someone downstairs laughed.

Toronto did not know my grandmother had died.

That made me angry in a way I could not explain.

How dare the world continue?

How dare traffic lights change?

How dare someone complain about the weather?

How dare my email notifications keep arriving?

I sat down because my legs no longer trusted me.

For a long time, I said nothing.

Then the guilt came.

Not sadness first.

Guilt.

I should have called more.

I should have visited.

I should have sent more money.

I should have asked more questions.

I should have recorded her voice.

I should have remembered the exact way she laughed.

I should have gone back before I had anything to prove.

That was the cruelest part.

I had spent years trying to become someone worthy of returning.

But she had never asked me to return worthy.

She had only asked me to call.

To eat.

To wear a jacket.

To not make that face.

I pressed my hand over my mouth and cried in a way I had not cried since leaving home.

Not quiet enough to be dignified.

Not loud enough to be free.

Just broken.

The kind of crying that makes you feel young and old at the same time.

Afterward, I sat on the floor beside my bed, the same way I had on my first night after moving out.

Different room.

Better apartment.

Better furniture.

Better income.

Same floor.

Same boy.

That was when I realized grief did not care how far I had climbed.

It knew where to find me.

For days, I moved through life like someone pretending to be alive.

Work.

Emails.

Calls.

Invoices.

Groceries.

Laundry.

People asked if I was okay.

I said, "Yeah."

The old lie still fit.

But something inside me had shifted.

Grandma's death made success look different.

Smaller.

Not meaningless.

Never meaningless.

I had fought too hard to insult what I built.

But success was not the god I once thought it was.

It could buy groceries.

It could pay rent.

It could build options.

It could give me distance from people who hurt me.

It could make survival easier.

But it could not stop time.

It could not bring back a grandmother.

It could not preserve a childhood.

It could not make the past wait politely until I was ready to face it.

Mali had moved on by then too.

Or maybe she had moved on long before and I only noticed late.

Distance had already loosened us years earlier. The messages became shorter, then rarer.

Birthdays were remembered, but not always on time. Updates came through photos, not conversations.

Then one evening, after a long day, I saw her post.

Mali standing beside a man I did not know.

Her smile was different.

Not fake.

Not forced.

Older.

Peaceful in a way that did not include me.

There was no betrayal.

That almost made it worse.

She had done nothing wrong.

She had stayed in the life I left. She had grown inside it. She had loved someone who was there, someone who knew her ordinary days, someone who did not require memory to keep a relationship alive across oceans.

I wanted to feel jealous.

Jealousy would have been easier than grief.

Jealousy gives you a target.

Grief gives you a mirror.

I looked at her smile and realized I was not mourning a girlfriend.

I was mourning evidence.

Evidence that the boy under the temple trees was gone.

Evidence that promises made in childhood do not survive just because they were sincere.

Evidence that the past does not wait politely for you to become ready.

I typed a message.

I'm happy for you.

I stared at it for a long time.

Was I?

Part of me was.

The better part.

The part of me that still remembered her kindness.

The smaller part wanted to ask if she remembered the temple wall, the bracelet, the evening I confessed like an idiot and she told me I talked too much when I was scared.

But I did not ask.

Some memories should not be dragged into the present and forced to explain why they survived.

I sent the message.

She replied the next day.

Thank you, Abe. I hope you're doing well too.

Doing well.

There it was again.

The phrase people used when they stood too far away to see the cracks.

I answered: I am.

It was not completely a lie.

That was new.

I was doing well.

Objectively.

I had survived.

I had work, education, a business, savings, a future.

Objectively, the boy my mother said was not destined to survive had survived enough to become difficult to dismiss.

But life was not only objective.

That was the lesson I learned too late.

Objectively, I was successful.

Emotionally, I was still learning how to live inside the life I had saved.

For a while, I became harder to reach.

Not because no one tried.

Because I did not know how to open the door.

People liked me from a distance.

I had learned how to be respectable.

Reliable.

Polite.

Intelligent.

Useful.

Even charming, when the situation required it.

That surprised people. They thought quiet meant awkward. They did not know quiet people spend years studying rooms. I knew when to joke. When to listen. When to make a customer feel heard. When to speak with confidence even if my stomach was tight.

Business taught me performance.

Trauma had prepared me for it.

But closeness was different.

Closeness required the parts of me I had hidden for survival.

The needy parts.

The angry parts.

The ashamed parts.

The boy who still wanted someone to ask if he had eaten.

The teenager who flinched at footsteps.

The eighteen-year-old sitting on a basement floor, crying because silence had finally become safe.

Those parts did not belong in meetings.

They did not belong in emails.

They did not belong in the clean story people preferred.

So I kept them locked away.

When someone asked, “How are you?”

I said, “Good.”

When someone said, “You work too much.”

I smiled.

When someone wanted to know me beyond my goals, I became busy.

Busy was a beautiful excuse.

Nobody argued with busy.

Busy sounded responsible.

Busy made loneliness look productive.

Then one winter evening, I came home from work and did nothing.

That sounds small.

It was not.

I did not open my laptop.

I did not answer emails.

I did not check invoices.

I did not study.

I did not build.

I took off my boots, placed my keys in the bowl near the door, washed my hands, and sat by the window.

Snow fell over Toronto.

Streetlights turned the road gold. Cars moved slowly through slush. A streetcar passed with a metallic groan. People walked below with hoods up, paper cups in hand, shoulders raised against the cold.

The city looked tired.

So did I.

For once, I let myself be tired without calling it weakness.

I thought of Thailand.

Not perfectly.

The memories were blurry now, and that hurt less than it used to. Maybe memory was not supposed to stay sharp forever. Maybe it softened so we could carry it without bleeding every time.

I thought of the tree house.

The graveyard.

The dog-eyed tiger painted on the wall.

The bicycle trailer house collapsing into the ditch.

Mali laughing under temple trees.

Grandma's trembling hand hitting my knee.

"Your face is loud."

I smiled.

Then I cried again.

Not like before.

Not broken.

Just sad.

There is a difference.

Broken crying asks the world to undo what happened.

Sad crying knows it cannot.

When the tears stopped, the apartment was still quiet.

But the quiet did not feel empty anymore.

It felt like space.

Space for grief.

Space for memory.

Space for the boy I had been and the man I was still becoming.

For years, I thought healing meant proving everyone wrong.

I thought if I became successful enough, stable enough, disciplined enough, untouchable enough, the past would lose its power.

But the past does not disappear when you win.

It becomes part of the house.

You learn where it lives.

You learn which rooms still hurt.

You learn when to open the windows.

I looked around my apartment.

The proper desk.

The work bag.

The business notes.

The paid bills.

The small amulet from Grandma beside my laptop.

The life I had built from rent, fear, paychecks, sleepless nights, stubbornness, and scraps of hope.

It was not the ending I once imagined.

No perfect family reunion.

No apology from my mother.

No father returning with regret.

No childhood love waiting under a temple tree.

No grandmother alive to see every version of me I fought to become.

Just me.

A young man in Toronto.

Still mixed.

Still grieving.

Still guarded.

Still ambitious.

Still learning how to be gentle with himself.

Still here.

For a long time, I had thought "still here" was a small thing.

That night, it felt enormous.

I stood up, made tea, and opened the window slightly even though the air was cold. Snow smell entered the room. Not like Thailand rain. Not like temple incense. Not like old wood and herbs.

Different.

Mine now, in its own way.

I held the warm cup between my hands and whispered the words I had wanted to say to Grandma.

"I made it."

The room did not answer.

But for once, I did not need it to.

Because I knew.

Not perfectly.

Not forever.

But enough.

I had made it out.

I had built something.

I had survived the people who said I would not.

And even after all the leaving, losing, forgetting, grieving, and starting again, some part of me was still that boy with paint on his hands, staring at broken pieces and believing they could become a home.

Maybe that was my inheritance.

Not money.

Not comfort.

Not an easy life.

The stubborn belief that broken things could still be rebuilt.

Outside, Toronto kept moving.

Inside, I kept breathing.

And for the first time, surviving did not feel like the whole story.

It felt like the beginning of one I finally belonged to.