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“ Red”

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I can't pinpoint the exact time I notice it but it's been a while.

Nowadays, when I ask my brother for my charger, he doesn't throw it. He returns it silently and vanishes.

He doesn't pace the verandah after dinner like he used to. Instead, dissolves into his room without a sound.

He no longer spends the day typing on his phone, smiling. I seldom find him using it but when he does, he stares at it as if expecting the phone to start talking.

The biggest change is the look in his eyes. They give him away. Doesn't matter if he's eating or talking, his mind is lost in a far off place, struggling to find its way back.

He seems to be looking for something, trying to come to terms with something. A little patience and lots of coaxing later, I finally succeed. He agrees to open up.

He was talking to a girl on instagram for the past 9 months. 'Almost a year' he says looking out the window, as if expecting to locate a key that would roll the year back. They were both the same age, loved and hated the same things. It was all going fine until one day, when she disappeared. Just like that.

'Did you guys argue?'

Seeing the point of my veiled question, he answers there was no argument ever and no, she's not blocked him.

He has checked and verified that already.

Her profile doesn't exist anymore and apparently, she didn't use any other social media. They never exchanged numbers either.

He clearly isn't able to wrap his head around it.

'But it's nothing dramatic' he says trying to smile. 'I was talking to someone everyday and one day, it stops, that's it.'

I know it's not.

He muses how suddenly one day, without even stepping out of your room, the familiar life feels like an alien land.

How it takes at least 3 people to make a crowd but just one person is enough for loneliness to creep in.

He shows me her picture. She'd sent it once. That's her sole remnant.

The girl is pretty but what catches my eye is her hair. It's red.

Not auburn or chestnut but fiery red.

'She's like a distant cousin of the Gulmohar tree outside.'

He doesn't smile. He simply explains that she was a huge K-pop fan and he himself isn't much aware of K-pop except that it stands for Korean pop.

That night, I don't revise my UPSC study material. I've whacked my brain studying history, polity, geography and still, I'm helpless.

My brother has fallen silent but there are questions his eyes are constantly asking. I blabber what I can to comfort him but we both know that we don't know. We don't know the answers he's looking for.

The disappointment is heavy. I browse the internet to avoid it and end up reading articles about dark matter, dark energy.

Yeah, those fancy mysterious terms.

Apparently, everything that we see and know is less than even 5% of the universe. The rest 95% is unknown. Our reality isn't 'the reality'. It's only a fragment.

It's almost amusing how this cosmic situation mirrors our individual lives.

For us, dark matter isn't some secret of the universe. It's what we seek in our lives every day but mostly don't find. There are many questions, hardly any answers.

Like why on earth did I graduate in Chemistry, did an MBA followed by a job and now preparing for civil services? Why?

When people ask me this, fighting an urge to break the flower pots of my balcony on their heads, I give them a manufactured, practiced answer.

But the truth is, I don't know.

Whatever questions we're dealing with, sudden vanishing of a red haired girl or careers, the pain of not knowing is real.

Days go by and my brother seems to get better. Opening up really heals if not cure. I urge him to transform himself. Yeah, revamping oneself and stuff like that. I do feel it works.

One day, he's out for a long time. When he returns and removes his helmet, Ma keeps staring at him in horror. He's got a new hairstyle but that's not the point. He's dyed his hair red. It's not bright red but magenta and brown and I don't know what.

He explains, especially to Ma, that he's absolutely smitten by K-pop and goes on explaining what it's about. I barely listen.

For the first time in a long time, I know a truth. I don't have a question but an answer.

But I don't know if I like having it.