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Promises

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SUMAN

“Why’re you standing here, Ma?” Suman stepped onto the balcony. “You know this polluted air aggravates your asthma. Come inside.”

Suman gasped. 120 miles away, through the sky suddenly clear, the blue-white Himalayas gleamed wide.

Moist-eyed, Grandma turned. “It’s been thirty years since I’ve seen the Himalayas here.”

ARNAB

Non-essential shipments: suspended.

The Nike teeshirt Arnab ordered hadn’t been shipped. Neither had Rumi’s D&G aviators. Slaving all day, Arnab and Rumi had fallen into ordering something every evening. Something to look forward to.

Home, now, across their office-desk, Arnab glanced up at Rumi. A smile hesitated at Rumi’s lips.

TRISHA

After hours queueing, Trisha entered the supermarket. Vegetable-shelves: empty. Everything was being rationed. Still – production curtailed, transport disrupted – supplies were simply insufficient. Swallowing tears, Trisha bought potatoes again.

Fumbling for keys, Trisha glanced at her garden. Half-withered tomato saplings. Shrivelled pumpkin creepers. Commenced with fresh enthusiasm, gardening, too, had succumbed to old laziness.

SUMAN

“I’m bored, Ma!” cried Girish. “Dhanush is playing outside!”

Suman hesitated, glancing outside. “Dhanush doesn’t have asthma.”

“Let him go,” said Grandma. “The air’s clean now! He’ll be fine.”

Girish ran off. Grandma approached the air-purifier. “Let’s turn

this off now, daughter. This burns electricity.
Dirties other people's air."

ARNAB

Arnab and Rumi had been in love. Ten years ago. Slaving all week, offices worlds apart. Collaborating, flirting, commiserating – with colleagues. Weekends consumed by binge-watching binge-shopping binge-drinking.

Arnab brought the chamomile tea to Rumi at the window-seat. She'd had chamomile tea every evening for seven years. He'd just learned this.

TRISHA

Trisha uprooted the weeds. White flowers. Parthenium. Finally she'd learned the name of this weed she'd seen always.

A bird landed near her. Mynah? No. Coucal.

How could she mistake it? She'd been a birder. A lifetime ago, she'd seen coucals here in Bangalore.

Sun-yellow tomato-flowers nodded in the breeze.

SUMAN

The lockdown lifted.

The government had promised more buses. More bus-routes. So that the cars that'd left the streets could stay off. So that Grandma could keep watching the Himalayas from the balcony in Jalandhar.

No.

Simran bought another air-purifier. She changed out Grandma's anti-pollution-mask, and Girish's, every week, now.

ARNAB

The lockdown lifted.

Arnab and Rumi had promised: dinner together. Weekends together. They'd bought this house together. Now, they'd discussed a baby. They'd stopped ordering shiny things online. Arnab had started missing Rumi when she nipped from their office-desk to the Bathroom.

No.

Working. Shopping. The twin sirens reclaimed them.

TRISHA

The lockdown lifted.

Trisha promised: she'd keep gardening. Feeding the bee-eaters time-travelling to her, iridescent green in the sunlight. She'd develop, at least, vegetable self-sufficiency. Against the next emergency, courtesy irresponsible world-leaders. She'd start voting. Buy only Organic.

No.

Blood-red tomatoes withered on the vine. Parthenium reclaimed everything.

PROMISES

Between Grandma and the Himalayas, gray-brown skies fell again. Herded back indoors, Girish demanded an Xbox. In her Audi, Suman grew reaccustomed to zero visibility.

Again, lovers became strangers. We moved out. Sold our houses. Married our colleagues.

Coucals and bee-eaters disappeared. For good, this time.

We made promises. But old habits reclaimed us.