

Colors Before the Dark

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Introduction: The Architecture of Before

There is a specific, blindingly vibrant shade of blue that only exists in the sky right before the world violently ends. It is an unapologetic, piercing azure, devoid of a single wispy cloud to soften its sheer intensity. That was the exact color of the Seattle sky on the morning of Tuesday, October 14th. It was a morning that smelled deceptively, cruelly perfect.

Vibha Jha stood in the center of their small, sun-drenched kitchen, her bare feet flat against the cool, worn terracotta tiles. The air was

a thick, intoxicating blanket woven from the rich, dark, earthy aroma of freshly ground Guatemalan espresso beans and the sharp, bright sizzle of butter melting in a cast-iron pan. Golden hour sunlight poured through the eastern window, catching the dancing motes of dust in the air and painting long, warm, amber rectangles across the wooden dining table.

Michael was standing by the door, framed by the light. He wore his heavy, scuffed black leather jacket, the material radiating a faint, comforting scent of cedarwood, old rain, and his signature bergamot cologne. He was humming a low, off-key tune, the sound a deep, resonant baritone vibration that Vibha could feel in her own chest. He strapped his helmet under his chin, the metallic *click* of the clasp a sharp, precise sound in the quiet room.

"I'll pick up the wine on the way home," he had said, his voice muffled slightly by the padded visor. He flashed her a grin, his eyes crinkling at the corners—bright, lively, and impossibly green.

"Don't forget the garlic this time," she called back, tossing a damp dish towel over her shoulder.

He laughed, the sound loud and uninhibited, echoing off the tile backsplash. He pushed the heavy oak door open. The sharp, crisp, pine-scented autumn air rushed in, sweeping away the warm smell of the coffee. He stepped out, the heavy door *thudded* shut behind him, and the lock clicked into place. A minute later, the deep, guttural, rhythmic *roar* of his motorcycle engine shattered the morning quiet, rattling the windowpanes before slowly fading down the street, eventually swallowed by the distant, ambient hum of city traffic.

That was the "Before." It was a reality constructed of warm colors, comforting domestic sounds, and the sweet, ignorant assumption of tomorrow.

The fracture occurred exactly forty-two minutes later.

Vibha was at her desk, typing an email, when her phone shattered the silence. It wasn't the warm, marimba ringtone she assigned to Michael. It was a harsh, shrill, aggressive electronic trill that instantly caused the hairs on her arms to stand on end.

The voice on the other end belonged to a stranger. It was a clinical, flat, profoundly terrified voice. A nurse at Harborview Medical Center. The words were a jumbled, chaotic rush of terrifying syllables: *Accident. Intersection. Freight truck. Blunt force trauma. Critical. Come immediately.*

The transition from the warm, golden kitchen to the hospital was a violent sensory whiplash. Vibha remembered running through the automatic sliding doors of the emergency room, instantly assaulted by an environment designed to combat death. The lighting was an aggressive, headache-inducing, shadowless fluorescent white that made everyone look like a corpse. The air was frigid, heavily conditioned, and smelled overwhelmingly of industrial bleach, rubbing alcohol, and the sharp, coppery, unmistakable metallic tang of fresh blood.

The sounds were a chaotic, terrifying symphony of panic. The frantic, squeaking wheels of gurneys rushing across linoleum floors. The loud, commanding shouts of doctors barking orders in a trauma bay. The rhythmic, agonizingly fast electronic *beep-beep-beep* of heart monitors fighting a losing battle. And beneath it all, the low, guttural wails of other families whose worlds had already collapsed.

A doctor with exhausted, bloodshot eyes and a paper mask pulled down around his neck pulled her into a small, windowless room. The room was painted a muted, institutional seafoam green—a color likely chosen to be calming, but which only looked sickly and aquatic. The air in the tiny room was stagnant, smelling of cheap coffee and the doctor's nervous sweat.

When the doctor said the words, "*We did everything we could, but his injuries were incompatible with life,*" the sound vanished from Vibha's world. It was as if she had been abruptly submerged in deep, freezing water. The doctor's mouth continued to move, forming shapes, but the roaring in her ears drowned it out. It was a high-pitched, deafening hiss of static, the sound of a universe instantly losing its center of gravity.

They let her see him. The room where they kept him was freezing. The harsh light bounced off the stainless-steel table. Michael lay there, his skin an unnatural, waxy shade of grey, completely drained of the vibrant, olive undertones he had possessed just three hours prior. The metallic smell of blood had been scrubbed away, replaced by the heavy, sweet, suffocating odor of chemical cleansers and the faint, terrible scent of raw, torn tissue. Vibha touched his hand. The skin, usually radiating a deep, comforting heat, was as cold and unyielding as marble.

The funeral was a blur of dark, heavy fabrics and suffocating floral scents. The sky, as if mocking her, had remained that same piercing, brilliant blue. The air smelled of crushed grass, wet earth from the freshly dug grave, and the cloying, nauseatingly sweet perfume of hundreds of white lilies—a smell that would trigger a wave of nausea in Vibha for years to come. The sound of the heavy crematorium doors sliding shut was the loudest sound she had ever

heard. It was a final, concussive metallic click that echoed in the deepest hollows of her bones.

When Vibha returned to their apartment, the space was fundamentally altered. The golden sunlight had retreated, leaving the rooms bathed in a permanent, dusty, slate-grey twilight. The silence in the apartment was no longer the peaceful quiet of a shared life; it was a heavy, oppressive, ringing vacuum. The cedar and bergamot scent of his jacket, still hanging exactly where he left it, transformed from a comfort into a jagged, serrated knife twisting in her chest.

For fourteen months, the color drained entirely from Vibha's vision. She lived in a muted, sepia-toned purgatory. Food tasted like wet ash and cardboard. The music she used to love sounded like discordant, metallic noise. The world outside her window continued its chaotic, vibrant march, full of blaring horns, shouting pedestrians, and bright neon lights, but Vibha was trapped behind a thick pane of soundproof, frosted glass.

She existed in this grey, scentless, silent void, floating untethered in the dark, right up until the desperate, sleepless night at 3:00 a.m., when the harsh, blue glow of her laptop screen illuminated the dark apartment, and her trembling fingers clicked on a digital thread that would drag her, kicking and screaming, through the fires of hell and back into the light.

Chapter 1: The Thread

Vibha sat alone in the stifling stillness of her dimly lit apartment, the harsh, artificial blue glow of her laptop screen casting long, spectral shadows against the peeling wallpaper. Outside, the city of

Seattle wept, rain drumming a relentless, percussive rhythm against the windowpane, accompanied by the occasional, distant hiss of tires slicing through slick asphalt. Inside, the air was heavy and stagnant, carrying the phantom scent of cedar and stale, masculine cologne—the lingering ghost of Michael’s leather jacket still hanging by the door.

It had been exactly fourteen months, three weeks, and two days since Michael’s motorcycle accident. The police report, a sterile document of tragedy, stated he never saw the freight truck coming. She had read that crinkled, tear-stained paper so many times that the black ink had begun to blur, the clinical words losing their meaning, transforming into abstract shapes. But the absolute, suffocating silence that followed the police officer’s knock on her door never faded. It was a silence that rang in her ears, louder than any scream.

Tonight, a vicious bout of insomnia drove her to the glowing rectangle of her computer. The mechanical *clack-clack-clack* of the keyboard was the only sound in the room as she navigated to social media, scrolling mindlessly through the endless, scrolling void of the internet. The brightness of the screen seared her tired eyes, leaving purple afterimages every time she blinked. Eventually, her cursor hovered over a post that seemed to pulse with a dark gravity:

"What is the worst way anyone you know has died?"

She clicked it, half-expecting to find a collection of dark, irreverent humor or detached, fictionalized anecdotes written by bored teenagers. Instead, the comments hit her like physical, breathless blows to the chest. The pixels arranged themselves into monuments of genuine human agony.

A woman from the Midwest described her elderly neighbor, crushed beneath the massive, mud-caked treads of a rogue construction vehicle while pulling out of her own driveway. Vibha could almost hear the deafening, guttural roar of the diesel engine, the sickening, metallic crunch of the sedan's frame collapsing like a soda can, and smell the acrid mixture of churned damp earth, leaking hydraulic fluid, and vaporized gasoline.

Further down, the screen bathed Vibha's face in an icy light as she read another account: a young brother pushed from the shadowy, echoing heights of a sixth-floor parking garage over a set of car keys. The commenter described the horrifying rush of the wind, the dizzying blur of concrete rushing upward, and the hollow, wet *crack* that echoed through the desolate urban canyon.

But it was a post by a retired state trooper that made Vibha's hands tremble violently, rattling the desk. He wrote of arriving at a midnight crash on a rural highway. A young man was trapped behind the steering wheel of a mangled, burning coupe. The officer described the blinding, infernal orange-white glare of the flames, the blistering heat that singed his eyebrows, and the nauseating, sweet-chemical stench of melting plastic and burning hair. He wrote of the man's desperate, high-pitched shrieks, begging not to die in the fire, as the cop frantically, uselessly battered the jammed door with his baton. The screams, the officer wrote, still howled in the autumn wind whenever he stood alone outside.

By 3:00 a.m., hot, salty tears were streaming down Vibha's face, dripping onto her collarbone, leaving damp circles on her cotton shirt. She tasted the brine on her lips. These strangers' catastrophic losses mirrored her own—sudden, brutally senseless, and violently irreversible. The neon sign from the bodega across the street

flickered to life, painting a jagged stripe of crimson across her living room floor, looking entirely too much like spilled blood.

She bookmarked the thread. Her fingers, though shaking, found purpose. She opened a new document, the screen flashing to a blinding, pristine white, and began typing frantic notes. The sharp *clatter* of the keys filled the apartment, a chaotic symphony of sudden inspiration. What had begun as morbid, late-night curiosity was rapidly crystallizing into an undeniable obsession. She would collect these stories. Not for voyeurism, not for macabre entertainment, but to desperately understand how human lungs continued to draw breath after the air had been entirely sucked from the room. Maybe, just maybe, in the raw architecture of their survival, she could find a blueprint for her own.

The next morning, the sky broke into a pale, bruised violet, casting a cold, fragile light over the city. The scent of ozone and wet pavement drifted through the cracked window. Vibha picked up her phone, the glass cool against her flushed cheek, and called her editor.

"I want to write a book," she said, her voice raspy from disuse, yet harder than it had been in a year. "Not fiction. Real deaths. The absolute worst ones people have known."

Through the static of the receiver, her editor hesitated, his sharp intake of breath clearly audible. The silence stretched, thick and uncomfortable, before he finally exhaled. "It's dark, Vibha. But... if anyone can find the humanity in it, it's you. I'll give you a short deadline. Don't lose yourself in this."

Vibha hung up, the sharp *beep* signaling the end of her old life. She printed the longest comments, the printer whirring and grinding, spitting out pages warm to the touch and smelling faintly of hot

toner and bleached wood pulp. She uncapped a bright, neon-yellow highlighter, the squeak of the felt tip loud in the quiet room, marking names she would carefully change, guarding details she would respectfully fictionalize. She didn't know it yet as she stared at the sea of highlighted yellow amidst the black text, but this digital thread of shared misery would pull her through nine terrifying circles of other people's personal hells and, miraculously, drag her back toward the warm, vibrant surface of the living.
