

The Tree in the Silence

Written by Danny Kwon

As the automatic doors of Saskatoon Airport slid open, the cold air stung Neha's cheeks.

The first breath she took felt like shards of ice sliding down her throat.

She tightened her scarf and pulled her suitcase along.

A waiting Uber blinked its headlights. Neha hurried inside.

The driver glanced at her in the rearview mirror.

"You picked quite a night to arrive."

"What do you mean?"

"When the snow falls like this, all sound gets buried in it — car engines, footsteps, even voices. It's as if the whole world holds its breath."

Neha turned to look out the window. Snowflakes drifted endlessly in the glow of the streetlamps.

"It's my first winter in this city... it feels strange."

"You'll get used to it soon enough."

Silence settled between them. Neha pulled out her phone and sent a message to her ex.

How have you been?

Her fingers trembled slightly.

She arrived in front of her mother and sister's house. The door swung open and her sister ran out.

"Neha!"

Their mother followed behind.

"You're here. Was it cold?"

"Yeah, it was... but I'm fine."

The three of them embraced briefly in the snow.

"This is your room," her mother said, showing her a small but warm and cozy space.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Get some rest, and come down for breakfast in the morning."

With that, her mother closed the door.

Neha didn't even take off her coat before collapsing onto the bed and falling asleep.

The next morning, she came downstairs for breakfast.

On the table sat hot soup and freshly baked bread.

Her sister smiled.

"So... how long are you planning to stay?"

"I'm not sure yet," Neha said.

Her mother poured herself coffee.

"It's time you settled down, Neha. You're not getting any younger. You should meet a good man and start a family."

Neha stopped tearing her bread.

"This again? Mom, I'm not marrying a man."

"What do you mean, 'not'? You need a stable life."

"Does a stable life have to mean marrying a man?"

Her mother's face tightened.

"I'll never accept... that strange idea you have about yourself."

Her sister spoke cautiously.

"Neha... maybe you should listen to her. It'd be... an easier path."

Neha let out a bitter laugh.

"Easier? The hardest thing in the world is living a lie."

"It's just a phase," her mother said sharply. "One day you'll see. A woman is meant to—"

"Stop! I'm a lesbian. That's who I am. No matter how much you deny it, that's not going to change."

The air around the table froze. Her sister lowered her head. Her mother said nothing.

Neha put on her coat.

"I'm going out."

She stepped into Avalon Park.

The park was blanketed in snow.

Far from the others stood a single tree, alone, still, and crowned with snow.

I want to be like that. Standing alone. Unshaken.

Her boots crunched in the snow.

The Uber driver's words came back to her.

All sound gets buried in it.

It was true. She felt like she was the only one left in the world.

Her phone rang.

"Neha?"

"Yeah, Mom."

"I... spoke too harshly. I'm sorry."

Neha looked at the snow melting on the back of her hand.

"I'm sorry too, Mom."

"I still don't understand everything about you... but I want you to be happy."

Neha closed her eyes.

"...Thank you."

The moment she hung up, a message from her ex arrived.

Sorry, I was tired last night and went to bed early.

Neha stared at the screen for a long moment before deleting the contact.

"That's enough."

On her way home, she stopped in front of a brightly lit grocery store.

She stood there for a moment, then said to herself, "Alright... let's get something."

She filled her basket with the foods her mother and sister liked.

The snow was falling harder now.

Through the glow of a distant streetlamp, she could just make out the lone tree in the park.

She murmured softly,

"Maybe... I can stand like that too."

Neha stood still for a moment, watching the snow gather along the tree's bare branches. It swayed faintly in the wind, fragile yet unbroken. She glanced down at her own shadow stretching across the white ground and felt, for the first time in a long while, that it belonged there. The silence no longer pressed against her; it simply held her, steady and alive.