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The Phone Call

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The Phone Call

The names of missing persons were listed in alphabetical order. Each one had a grainy, black-and-white photograph next to it.

It had been six months since it happened. Nadia started living alone in her two-bedroom house. While the pot of water boiled in the kitchen, Nadia scanned her finger down the newspaper page.

She recognized her husband's name. His round face, bold eyes, and forced smile stared back. They didn't own a camera and certainly never posed for a photograph together. Waleed said it was too soon. She'd found his photo in an old album, shoved under his bed. It was an old photograph from before she'd met him. The distant hills behind him reminded her of the deep valleys, the tall pine trees that danced for the river which ran alongside the town. It was the only time they'd gone on a trip together. Resisting the urge to stare back at the picture too long, she checked her house address and phone number underneath the caption.

Nadia spent the winter sitting on the two-seater couch, imagining her husband beside her, watching the snowflakes burst into tiny droplets on the glass windows.

Pouring the boiled water into a mug along with a teabag, she felt a sudden urge to open the dusty shoebox resting above the fireplace. She'd watered the white orchids on the kitchen island and fed Dalia, her goldfish, who'd hidden behind the plastic ferns as if afraid of Nadia's figure looming over the bowl.

Nadia wrapped a shawl around her skinny body, put on her snow boots, and unlocked the trunk of her old Toyota, fingering through the stack of posters she'd printed yesterday. In the photograph, her husband stood next to a frozen creek.

Slamming the trunk shut, she crawled in, drove past the children's playground, and parked next to the curb. She stapled posters on the lampposts and left a handful on people's welcome mats.

Her car tires nearly skidded at the bend in the road, and she stopped at the corner shop.

The man behind the counter with stringy black hair dabbed in too much oil, pressed his lips together and shook his head in frustration.

He handed the customer a box of Marlboro before shifting his attention to her. "I told you I'm not taking any more of those flyers. Go," he said, dismissively waving his hand.

Nadia felt her body stiffen, and her hands began to shake. No one would speak to her in that tone if her husband were here. "It's not a flyer." She stood in front of the large board covered in job flyers, snow removal services, an ad for an old cabinet, and other useless information with strips of numbers ready for people to grab. They covered what she'd previously posted.

"How many times have I said it. That board isn't for the dead."

She carried on, flipping through the ads until she found last month's poster with a different picture of Waleed. She ripped it, replacing it with the new one.

After the door chimed shut, she watched the man through the window. He left the counter and went up to the board. Nadia was sure he'd rip the paper off and crumple it in his fist like last time, but the man stood with his arms crossed, craning his neck forward.

Nadia shivered from the cold. Her skin paper-thin. She left a few posters at the community mailboxes before parking the car in her driveway.

"You're at it again, I see," Mrs. Fauzia said. Nadia hadn't noticed her neighbour sitting on her front porch. She'd stopped noticing things that didn't matter anymore. Mrs. Fauzia marched down her steps onto Nadia's driveway and took the last poster from her hand. The silence widened the gap between them. "Do you want to come in? We'll have chai and something to eat. Maybe some jelly biscuits. They're your favourite, right?"

Nadia felt the evening breeze brush through her hair.

As if the woman was in a conversation with herself, she kept talking, "Okay, maybe I can come over for a bit. Keep you company?" Mrs. Fauzia enjoyed her front porch even in the cold, spending most of her time on the rickety plastic chairs. She wasn't the type to care what others got up to, but Nadia wished Mrs. Fauzia would leave her alone too.

"I have to go. The calls will start coming soon," Nadia said.

Mrs. Fauzia gave her a look filled with disappointment, and Nadia anticipated the words that followed. Words that she'd heard from others many times.

“Look, I know it’s been difficult for you, Nadia, but you’re draining yourself. It’s unhealthy. You’re growing thin, waiting for something that won’t happen.”

“They never found it. The body.”

“Nadia.” She paused as if searching for the right words. “There were four other men. The report made it very clear.” Her tone became a low murmur. As if saying the words brought her discomfort. “My dear, obsessing over it won’t make him walk through your front door.”

“You don’t know that.” Nadia marched up her front steps and locked the door behind her.

She shuffled into the kitchen, fed Dalia again and poured an entire jug of water into her potted orchids until the pots overflowed onto the counter.

Nadia couldn’t silence her thoughts. As though her grasp on the truth had unravelled. She began to grow impatient. An hour passed, but no calls.

Clinging to the pieces of her husband was like trying to grip water in her fist. Nadia grabbed the shoebox from above the fireplace, blew the dust off the lid and opened it. A black and white photograph of her younger self smiled back. She barely recognized the woman in the picture. Beside her, Waleed stood handsome and tall in nothing but his saggy pantaloons.

She took out the newspaper from three years ago, unfolded it, and read the heading: Searchlight Coal Industries Disaster. A man in uniform with a shiny badge pinned to his chest had showed up at the door two days later and gave her the news along with the paper.

The phone rang. Nadia jumped at the sudden intrusion. She launched herself at the receiver.

“Yes?”

“Today’s the day, dear.” It was a man’s voice, muffled, raspy, yet distant, as though caught behind a brick wall. Nadia had clearly misheard. She imagined it.

“Who’s this?” She felt the sweat sliding down her hand onto the receiver.

His faint chuckle triggered something deep inside her. “You should be ashamed of yourself.” She hung up the phone.

Why would he call? Why not just come home?

Pouring another cup of tea, Nadia tapped her fingernails on Dalia’s fishbowl, but the goldfish

didn't budge. Her tiny fins weakly fluttered in the water, fighting to keep her from sinking.

When the phone rang again, Nadia let it ring, hoping the caller would hang up, but it kept ringing until she couldn't bear it. She set her teacup on the table and held the receiver in front of her face, close enough to make out the voice on the other end.

"Say something."

She suddenly didn't like answering the phone. "If you're not calling about the poster, don't bother because I'm not interested." Nadia wanted to slam the receiver back into place, but couldn't.

"I know you're afraid. It's okay. I can talk to you like this." The voice nearly had her, but she pulled herself back, forcing her heart to fight it.

"You can't prove it."

"July 14, 1964. The day I saw you standing outside the school gate. You braided your hair that day, tied them with purple ribbons."

The more she pulled, the more he tugged at her. "Who are you?"

"I told you. I can talk to you this way."

When she looked outside, the day had escaped from her. The sky had turned dark with the moon, only an idea behind loose clouds.

When she hung up the phone, she felt a burst of unwavering joy wrap around her heart. Every nerve in her body throbbled with excitement.

But the reasonable part of her kept fighting hard. To pull her away from the idea.

She grew thinner, started neglecting her meals, and mould began spreading on the sink dishes.

Dust collected on the kitchen tiles. Nothing mattered but the phone call.

Her potted plants drooped over the counter. The leaves had turned yellow, and Dalia swam around her bowl in erratic patterns like a prey lashing out defensively, trying to escape the inevitable.

Nadia now expected the phone to ring every morning. She wanted it to.

She combed her hair, tightly knotted it into a braid. She wore Waleed's favourite dress, blue with shimmering rhinestones embroidered on the front, and positioned herself on the two-seater beside the phone.

When it rang, she watched as Dalia floated to the surface, her orange belly facing up toward the ceiling. Nadia fixed her eyes on the stillness around her. A solitude that felt like an object without form and shadow. She felt the emptiness push itself into every crevice in the house, threatening to press itself right next to her, on the two-seater like an old friend.

She realised that humans were split into those who wished to move forward and those who chose to return.

The phone rang as snow quietly fell outside, making everything look bigger than it seemed. Nadia picked up the receiver, held it tight to her ear, not wanting to miss a single word and said, "Good morning, my dear."