

## **Before the World Woke Up – Achraj Virk**

I didn't mean to end up here.

It wasn't like I planned to spend the night outside, sitting in wet grass with my hoodie pulled over my head, shivering and tired and a bit scared. But after the fight with Mum, I couldn't stay in the house. The shouting had been too loud. The slamming doors, the things we said to each other, it all just got too much. So, I left, I grabbed my phone, put on my shoes, and walked. I didn't even think about where I was going until I got to the old field near the back of the oval. No one came here anymore, especially not at night. That made it the perfect place to disappear for a while.

At first, it felt kind of freeing, just being alone, away from the noise and pressure of everything. But as the hours dragged on, the cold set in; unfortunately, my phone had died ages ago. The silence wasn't peaceful anymore, it was heavy, uncomfortable, the kind of silence where your brain won't shut up and you keep replaying everything you wish you didn't say. I lay back on the ground and stared at the sky. The stars were bright, and the moon was hidden behind clouds. My fingers were freezing, but I didn't want to move. I didn't know where I was going next, or if I even wanted to go back. What if she didn't care? What if she were still angry, or worse, not even looking for me?

But then, slowly, something started to change. The black sky began to shift to a dark grey. Not all at once, just this faint change, like someone was slowly turning up a light. I sat up and looked around. The trees, which had been just big shadows all night, were starting to get shapes. The grass glistened a little with dew. The stars started to fade, and a soft, pale blue stretched across the sky.

It was the first light of dawn.

And it changed everything. Not in some magical, dramatic way, just enough to make things feel a little different. Like the world was waking up. Like I had a second chance. In that new light, I could actually see the path back to town. I could see my hands, my breath in the cold air, the colour of the sky changing from blue to a gentle pink. The world didn't feel so scary anymore. And, more importantly, neither did going home.

I started thinking about Mum, not the yelling or the anger, but the stuff underneath that. How tired she looked lately, how hard she was working since Dad left, how she always left the porch light on for me, even when we were fighting. I realised then that I hadn't just run away from home. I'd run away from her. Even though I didn't know exactly what would happen when I got back, whether we'd talk, or cry, or fight again, I knew I had to go. I stood up, brushed the grass off my jeans, and started walking. The town was so quiet in the early morning. The houses still had their curtains shut, but I could see kitchen lights turning on through a few windows. I passed a milk truck and a man walking his dog. No one looked twice at me.

When I turned onto my street, I saw that the porch light was still on. When I looked closer, there was Mum, she was sitting on the front steps in her dressing gown, holding a mug of tea, her eyes scanning the street. She looked exhausted. Then she saw me. She stood up so fast she nearly dropped her mug.

“Aiden?” she said, like she wasn’t sure I was real.

I didn’t know what to say. My throat felt tight, like I’d swallowed a rock. But I didn’t need to say anything. She walked down the steps and wrapped her arms around me. I hugged her back, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I didn’t feel angry or scared or lost. We didn’t fix everything in that hug, but something shifted. Maybe it was just the relief, maybe it was the sunrise. Or maybe it was just that I finally let myself believe that things could get better. That’s the thing about the first light of dawn: it doesn’t fix everything. But it makes you feel like you can.

And that’s enough, for me at least.