

Fall From Away

Part One — Chapters 1 to 9

SUBASH

CHAPTER 1

The Nine O'Clock Song

The song came on at 9:04 every morning, four minutes late, because Priya Raghunathan had never once in her life been on time for anything except the things that actually mattered to her.

She pressed play with her chin, because both her hands were busy — one holding her scooter key, the other holding a steel tiffin box that her mother had packed too full again — and the first note came through her left earphone only, since the right one had died in March and she had not yet replaced it.

It did not matter. She knew the song well enough to hear the missing half in her head.

It was called "Nine O'Clock." It opened with a single held note, a man's voice with no instrument behind it, and then the drums arrived underneath it like a floor sliding into place beneath someone who had been falling. Priya had heard this song, by her own careful count, one thousand four hundred and something times. She still did the thing she always did at the eleven-second mark, which was close her eyes for exactly as long as it is safe to close them while standing in a stairwell holding your breakfast.

"Akka." Her brother's voice came up from the courtyard. "You're going to be late."

"I'm always late."

"That's what I said."

Karthik was seventeen and had recently discovered that the most efficient way to love his sister was to insult her. Priya came down the stairs two at a time, wedged the tiffin into her bag, and looked at him.

"Did you eat?"

"Yes."

"Did you eat, or did you put the plate in the sink so Amma would think you ate?"

Karthik's face performed a small, guilty renovation.

"Sit," Priya said. "Two minutes. Eat the idli. I'll wait."

"You'll be late."

"I'll be later. There's a difference." She pushed him down onto the step, sat beside him, and unclipped the tiffin. The smell of coconut chutney rose up between them, green and sharp with green chilli, and for a second it was so completely the smell of every morning of her entire life that she felt a strange pinch behind her eyes, the way you sometimes do about a thing that has not gone anywhere yet.

The story continues.

Nine chapters. 51 pages.

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