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# MASAN

THE CURSE OF THE FORGOTTEN

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# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

## Chapter 1: The Return

The road to Jharigaon twisted like a coiled snake through the mist-laden valleys of Uttarakhand. The bus, an aging relic with faded blue paint and rattling windows, groaned as it climbed the steep incline. Arvind Joshi sat near the window, his fingers tapping idly against the metal armrest, his thoughts a tangled web of nostalgia and apprehension.

He had left this village twenty years ago, and now, after all these years, he was returning—not as the boy who had once played in its narrow lanes but as the new principal of the local school. He had received the job offer months ago, but something had always held him back. Maybe it was the weight of forgotten memories. Maybe it was something else.

The transfer order had come from the state education board. He hadn't applied for it — they said it made sense to assign someone who was born there. Locals wouldn't take the post. Word had gotten around about the school, especially after the last principal died under... strange circumstances. Some said they felt something wrong just reading the letter — like the paper itself carried bad luck. Others quit within days. Arvind hadn't said yes. But he hadn't said no either. And maybe, deep down, he needed to come back.

The thick pine forests lining the road seemed to whisper secrets to one another, their towering silhouettes swaying slightly in the evening breeze. The air smelled of damp earth and rotting leaves, mingled with a faint, acrid scent that Arvind couldn't quite place.

The driver, a wiry man with deep wrinkles, glanced at him through the rearview mirror. "Jharigaon, huh?" His voice was hoarse, carrying an undertone of something unspoken.

Arvind nodded. "Yes. I was born there."

The driver snorted. "Then you should know. People who leave don't always come back."

Arvind raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

The driver shook his head. "Nothing. Just... places like Jharigaon don't like to be forgotten. And they don't always welcome those who left."

Before Arvind could ask more, the bus hit a deep pothole, jolting him forward. He barely noticed the elderly man sitting beside him until now. The old man's face was like cracked stone, his eyes sharp and knowing. He studied Arvind in silence for a long moment before speaking.

"You should have stayed away," the man said quietly.

A chill ran down Arvind's spine. "Why do you say that?"

The old man didn't answer. Instead, he turned to stare out at the approaching village, his expression unreadable.

The bus wheezed to a stop. The driver called out in a gruff voice, "Last stop—Jharigaon."

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Arvind swallowed the unease that had begun creeping up his throat and stepped out onto the muddy road. The sun was setting, casting long, golden rays over the village. Small stone houses with sloping roofs stood in clusters, their chimneys emitting thin wisps of smoke. Villagers stood near their doorsteps, their conversations fading as they turned to look at him. Their gazes lingered a little too long.

There was something in their eyes—something he couldn't quite decipher.

Welcome? Recognition? Or was it something else entirely?

The air inside the house was thick with the scent of old wood, turmeric, and the faint mustiness of a place long untouched. As Arvind stepped inside, memories flooded him—childhood games played on the veranda, the sound of his mother humming while cooking, the way his father used to sit by the fire in the winters, puffing on his hookah. But now, the house felt different. Colder.

Nandan bolted the door behind them, his movements hurried. Arvind raised an eyebrow.

“Expecting someone?” he asked, trying to keep the tone light.

Nandan didn't smile. “Not someone. Something.”

Arvind sighed, dropping his bag onto an old wooden bench. “You always had a flair for the dramatic.”

Nandan ignored the jab. “I mean it, Bhai. Things have changed since you left.”

Arvind leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “What things?”

Nandan hesitated, rubbing his hands together as if struggling to find the right words. “Do you remember Masan?”

The name sent a flicker of unease through Arvind. It was a word he hadn't heard in decades—one whispered by elders in fearful tones, a cautionary tale meant to scare children into obedience. **Masan**—a spirit cursed to roam the land, preying on those who disturbed the dead.

“That's just an old folktale,” Arvind said dismissively.

Nandan's expression darkened. “Is it?”

Before Arvind could respond, a sudden gust of wind rattled the wooden windows. The lamp on the table flickered. The peepal tree outside groaned as if protesting against an unseen force.

Then came the sound.

A low, deliberate **knock. Knock. Knock.**

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It came from the back of the house.

Arvind stiffened. "Who would be knocking at this hour?"

Nandan's face drained of color. He grabbed Arvind's arm, his grip firm. "Don't open the door," he whispered.

Arvind's pulse quickened. "Nandan—"

"Just listen to me!" Nandan's voice was barely above a breath. "Whatever happens, don't open that door."

Another knock. **Knock. Knock. Knock.**

The sound was slow, patient, as if whoever—or whatever—was outside knew they were listening.

Arvind swallowed, his throat dry. A cold dread coiled in his stomach.

The knocking stopped.

For a long moment, neither brother moved. The house was deathly silent. Then, in the distance, the howling of a lone jackal echoed through the valley.

Nandan finally released his grip. "Come on. You need rest. We'll talk in the morning."

Arvind wanted to argue, to demand answers, but the exhaustion from his journey weighed down on him. With a reluctant nod, he made his way to his old room, closing the wooden door behind him.

As he lay on his cot, staring at the ceiling, he couldn't shake the feeling that something had been standing outside that door—watching, waiting.

And he had the sinking suspicion that whatever it was... would return.

The night pressed heavily against the walls of the house, its silence broken only by the distant rustling of leaves. Arvind lay on his cot, staring at the wooden beams above him, his mind restless. Sleep should have come easily after the long journey, yet unease gnawed at him, like an itch he couldn't scratch.

The knocking from earlier still echoed in his ears. **Knock. Knock. Knock.** Slow. Deliberate. But when Nandan had refused to acknowledge it, when he had **begged** him not to open the door, a deeper fear had settled in Arvind's bones.

His brother wasn't the type to be easily frightened.

A sudden gust of wind rattled the window, the chill seeping through the gaps in the old wooden frame. The peepal tree outside creaked, its branches swaying like skeletal arms reaching for something unseen.

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Then he heard it again.

**Knock. Knock. Knock.**

This time, it wasn't coming from the door.

Arvind stiffened, his breath catching in his throat. The sound was coming from the window, just behind his head.

Slow. Measured. Closer.

His fingers gripped the coarse blanket as he turned his head slightly, peering toward the window. The lantern's dim glow barely reached the glass, but through the faint reflection, he saw something—a shape standing just beyond the frame.

Not a shadow. Not the wind.

Someone was there.

Arvind's pulse thundered in his ears. His instinct screamed at him to pull the blanket over his head like a child hiding from a nightmare, but a stronger force—curiosity, defiance—held him in place.

The knocking came again, softer this time. Almost... inviting.

He turned fully toward the window, heart hammering, eyes straining against the darkness. For a moment, all he saw was the night pressing against the glass. Then, as if stepping out of the shadows themselves, a face emerged.

A woman.

Her skin was ashen, her hollow eyes black pits against the pale moonlight. Long, unkempt hair clung to her gaunt face, and her lips, cracked and dry, parted slightly as if whispering something he couldn't hear.

Arvind's breath hitched. He wanted to move, to scream, to **do something**—but he was frozen, trapped in a silent battle between fear and reason.

Then, just as suddenly as she had appeared, the woman stepped back into the darkness, vanishing like mist.

The wind howled through the trees once more, and this time, Arvind could swear he heard something carried within it. A voice.

**"You shouldn't have come back."**

Sleep didn't come easy that night.

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Arvind lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, feeling the weight of the silence pressing against him. It was an odd kind of quiet—not the peaceful stillness of a mountain village, but something else. Something unnatural.

He closed his eyes, forcing his mind to settle, but the whispers of the past clung to him. Memories of his childhood here in Jharigaon surfaced like old scars—playing in the fields, running through the forests, listening to the elders tell stories around the evening fire. And then there were the darker memories, the ones he had buried deep. The ones about **Masan**.

The wind moaned through the wooden slats of the house, carrying with it a strange, acrid smell—burnt wood mixed with something metallic, something... rotten. He wrinkled his nose, shifting uncomfortably on the hard cot.

Then came the knocking.

**Knock. Knock. Knock.**

He jolted upright, his pulse hammering in his ears.

The sound was deliberate. Rhythmic. It wasn't the random creaking of wood settling in the cold or a stray animal brushing against the walls. It was a pattern. A request.

A demand.

He glanced toward the window, heart thudding against his ribs. The curtains billowed slightly in the night breeze, but through the thin fabric, he saw a shadow. A tall, slender figure standing completely still outside.

He sucked in a sharp breath.

**Someone was watching him.**

He hesitated, his fingers curling around the blanket as if it could shield him from whatever lurked beyond. The rational part of his mind screamed at him—**it's just a villager, some late-night wanderer**—but his gut told him otherwise.

Then, slowly, the figure **moved**.

Not walked. Not stepped. **Glided**.

The shadow shifted away from the window, vanishing into the darkness beyond.

Arvind exhaled, realizing only then that he had been holding his breath. He sat frozen for a long moment, straining his ears for any other sounds, but all he heard was the wind and the distant rustling of leaves.

It was nothing. A trick of the night.

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At least, that's what he told himself as he lay back down, eyes wide open, waiting for the dawn.

Morning came sluggishly, the sky painted in hues of orange and gray as the first rays of sunlight peeked over the hills. Arvind stepped outside, stretching the stiffness from his limbs. The village looked different in the daylight—less sinister, more ordinary.

But something still felt **off**.

The villagers moved about their morning routines, but their eyes flicked toward him with something unspoken. Whispers followed him as he walked past.

Near the well, a group of elderly women stood in hushed conversation, their heads snapping toward him as he approached. One of them, a frail woman with sunken cheeks, made a gesture—two fingers pressed against her lips, then flicked toward the ground.

A ward.

A sign to **keep evil away**.

Arvind frowned, but before he could ask, Nandan called out from the veranda.

“Bhai, breakfast is ready.”

Arvind turned back toward the house, shaking off the unease. He wouldn't let ghost stories dictate his thoughts.

But as he stepped onto the veranda, his foot landed on something **wet**.

His stomach lurched.

A **dark stain** spread across the wooden planks, seeping into the cracks. It was deep brown, almost black in the morning light, with a sickly metallic scent.

Blood.

Nandan followed his gaze and stiffened. He cursed under his breath and quickly wiped at the stain with an old rag.

“What the hell is this?” Arvind demanded.

Nandan didn't answer immediately. Instead, he tossed the rag aside, rubbing his hands together as if trying to shake off a lingering chill.

“It's nothing,” he finally muttered. “Just... a stray animal. Probably got injured near the house.”

Arvind narrowed his eyes. “You don't believe that.”

Nandan sighed heavily. “No, I don't. But I was hoping you would.”

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Silence hung between them, thick and suffocating.

Arvind folded his arms. "Tell me the truth, Nandan. What's going on?"

His brother hesitated, glancing around as if checking for unseen ears. Then, in a low voice, he said:

"There are things in this village you don't understand, Bhai. And I pray you never have to."

Arvind wanted to push further, to demand answers. But before he could speak, the village headman, **Mohan Lal**, appeared at the gate. His face was lined with worry, his deep-set eyes unreadable.

"Masterji," he greeted with a slow nod. "A word?"

Arvind exchanged a look with Nandan before stepping down to meet him. "What is it?"

Mohan Lal glanced toward the forest, his expression darkening. "You must follow some rules while you are here."

Arvind's brows knitted. "Rules?"

The old man nodded. "Never stay out after sundown. And never—under any circumstances—go near the **burning ghat by the river.**"

The way he said it sent an involuntary shiver down Arvind's spine.

"Why?" he asked, trying to keep his tone even.

Mohan Lal exhaled slowly. "Some places hold the past too tightly. It is best to leave them alone."

Arvind let out a short laugh, though it sounded forced even to his own ears. "Ghost stories, Mohan Lal-ji? I didn't take you for a superstitious man."

The village headman's face remained impassive. "It is not superstition, beta. It is **survival.**"

A heavy silence stretched between them.

Arvind swallowed. He wanted to dismiss the warning as just another rural belief, but the fear in Mohan Lal's voice was real. Tangible.

A cold wind stirred the dust around their feet. Somewhere in the distance, a faint knocking sound echoed through the valley.

**Knock. Knock. Knock.**

Arvind turned sharply toward the sound, but there was nothing there. Just the rustling trees and the distant call of a crow.

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He felt a pit form in his stomach.

Maybe he should have listened to Nandan.

Maybe he never should have come back.

The cry echoed through the morning air, sharp and chilling, sending a ripple of unease through Arvind. He turned toward the village square, his heartbeat quickening. The few villagers gathered there stood frozen, their faces etched with fear.

A woman, draped in a tattered shawl, knelt beside the well in the center of the square. Her sobs were quiet, yet raw, as she clutched a bundle wrapped in cloth. Arvind took a hesitant step forward, but Nandan grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"Don't," Nandan warned, his voice barely above a whisper.

Arvind frowned. "She needs help."

Before he could pull away, the village headman, Mohan Lal, appeared from the crowd. He approached the woman with careful steps, his face grim.

"It happened again," someone murmured behind Arvind.

Mohan Lal knelt beside the grieving woman. "Shanta," he said gently, his voice weighed with something that felt like dread. "Tell me what you saw."

Shanta rocked the bundle in her arms, her eyes hollow. "I told him not to go," she whispered. "I begged him." Her voice cracked. "But he didn't listen."

Mohan Lal's jaw tightened. He carefully pulled back the cloth covering the bundle.

Arvind caught a glimpse of what lay beneath—and his stomach lurched.

A child. No more than ten. His tiny body was stiff, his skin a pale, ashen gray. His eyes, wide open, were clouded and lifeless. But what made Arvind's breath hitch was the expression frozen on the child's face—a look of unfiltered terror.

Mohan Lal covered the child again, his face unreadable. He placed a hand on Shanta's shoulder. "Take him home. We will perform the rites."

Shanta let out a low, anguished wail before she was gently led away. The villagers began dispersing, but their silence was heavy, thick with unspoken words.

Arvind turned to Nandan, his throat dry. "What happened to that boy?"

Nandan didn't answer immediately. His eyes darted toward the forest, beyond the village limits.

"He went too close to the burning ghat," Nandan finally said.

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Arvind felt the chill return. “And?”

Nandan’s voice was low, filled with something close to fear.

“And something followed him back.”

A gust of wind rushed through the square, carrying with it the faintest sound.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Arvind swallowed hard. The knocking wasn’t coming from any door.

It was coming from the direction of the forest.

## Echoes of the Past

### 2.1 Echoes of the Past - *The Weight of Memories*

Morning arrived with a sky the color of old parchment. The mist hung low over Jharigaon, curling around rooftops like ghostly fingers. Arvind stepped out onto the veranda, stretching, trying to shake off the unease from the night before.

Nandan was already awake, standing near the threshold, staring at the forest’s edge. He held a steaming cup of tea but made no move to sip it.

“You didn’t sleep well,” Nandan observed, without looking at him.

Arvind sighed, rubbing his temples. “I kept hearing something... knocking.”

**Nandan frowned.** “You sure it wasn’t just the wind?”

**Arvind shook his head.** “It sounded too real. Too close.”

**Nandan hesitated.** “They say strange things started after the last principal died. The school’s too close to the old ghat. People hear things—crying, footsteps, even knocking. And now you’re staying just uphill from it.”

He looked away. “Maybe the land doesn’t know where the school ends and the village begins.”

Nandan’s fingers tightened around the cup. He exhaled, his breath misting in the cold air. “You’ll hear many things in this village, Bhai. Some of them you should ignore.”

Arvind studied his brother’s profile. “And the ones I shouldn’t?”

Nandan finally turned to him, his eyes dark. “The ones that call your name.”

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Arvind felt a chill creep up his spine. He forced a laugh. “You sound like one of those elders with their endless stories.”

Nandan didn’t smile. “Maybe they had a reason for telling them.”

Something about the way he said it made Arvind’s mouth go dry.

At that moment, a sharp cry echoed from the village square.

## **2.2 Echoes of the Past - *The School on the Hill***

The cry came again—clearer this time. A young boy’s voice, frightened. Arvind and Nandan exchanged a glance and rushed down the stone steps leading to the village square.

A small crowd had gathered near the old temple bell, forming a loose circle. In the center stood a boy no older than ten, trembling, pointing toward the trees.

“She was there,” the boy cried. “Right there—by the tree line. She was crying!”

“Who was crying?” Arvind asked, pushing through the crowd.

The boy looked up at him with wide, tear-filled eyes. “A woman. She had no face.”

A ripple of unease moved through the villagers.

“Where are his parents?” Nandan muttered.

“Home,” someone whispered. “They told him not to go near the forest.”

The boy was taken away, and the villagers dispersed slowly, their eyes avoiding Arvind’s. He noticed it again—the way they whispered only when he walked past. The way they didn’t quite meet his gaze.

Later that day, Arvind made his way to the school—the same building where he had once been a student, and which now, unnervingly, felt unfamiliar.

The path climbed gradually, lined with lantana shrubs and old boundary stones. The building stood on a raised platform overlooking the valley—modest in size, built with stone and timber, its windows clouded by age.

Inside, the air was still and cold. The scent of chalk mixed with wood rot and moisture. Desks sat undisturbed, coated in a fine layer of dust. On the blackboard, ghostly traces of old lessons remained.

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Arvind ran his fingers along the edge of the teacher's desk, lost in the pull of memory—classroom laughter, the click of chalk, the stern voice of his own teachers. But something broke the calm.

A sudden chill crept in from nowhere. A curtain fluttered slightly, though the windows were all shut. Papers lay scattered on the floor. The portrait of his predecessor hung crooked on the office wall.

He stepped into the principal's office—his office now. He bent to gather the loose pages when he saw it:

A footprint.

Not muddy. Not dusty.

**Burned.**

Singed into the wooden floor near the desk. Small. Bare. Childlike.

He straightened slowly, unease tightening in his chest.

That's when he heard it.

A whisper.

His name.

He turned sharply. Nothing.

He moved through the classroom, scanning the walls. There—scratches, faint but deliberate, carved into the wood like claw marks.

Another whisper. This time, closer. Accompanied by a rustling near the window.

He stepped toward it. Outside, just beyond the tree line, stood a shadow.

A figure.

A woman.

Gone in a blink.

Arvind backed away, breath shallow. The schoolhouse suddenly felt wrong—too quiet, too tight, as if it were holding its breath.

He needed answers. And he knew exactly where to start—with the elders who still remembered the past.

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## 2.3 Echoes of the Past - The Name No One Says

*Later that evening, shaken by what he had seen in the school, Arvind walked toward the temple. There were still people in this village who remembered the past—and maybe, just maybe, they would tell him the truth.*

Arvind's feet carried him toward the village temple, where the elders often gathered. The temple, an ancient stone structure adorned with moss-covered carvings, stood at the heart of Jharigaon. The scent of incense mixed with the crisp mountain air, but there was something else—a lingering smell of burnt wood and ash.

Inside, a small group of villagers sat cross-legged, murmuring prayers. Among them was Pandit Somnath, the village's oldest priest. His face, lined with deep wrinkles, held the weight of forgotten stories.

Arvind approached him respectfully. "Pandit-ji, may I speak with you?"

The old priest looked up, his gaze unreadable. "You have returned after many years, Masterji. What is it you seek?"

Arvind hesitated before saying, "I heard something last night... outside my house. A woman crying. And there was knocking."

The room fell silent.

One of the villagers—an elderly woman—let out a soft gasp and quickly made a protective gesture with her hands. Another muttered a prayer under his breath.

Pandit Somnath's expression darkened. "You should not have listened."

Arvind frowned. "What do you mean?"

The priest motioned for him to sit. "There are things in this village that do not belong to the living. The Masan does not like to be noticed."

A chill crawled up Arvind's spine. "The Masan?" The name was vaguely familiar, something from childhood stories, but he had never paid attention back then.

Pandit Somnath nodded. "A spirit of the restless dead. Bound to sorrow, feeding on those who hear its cries. It lingers near the burning ghat—the one Mohan Lal warned you about."

He looked at Arvind for a long moment. "That school—they should've never built it there. Too close to the forest. Too close to where they used to burn the unclaimed dead."

Somnath's voice dropped to a whisper. "When you build a place of learning on land meant for the forgotten, something stays behind. It waits. It watches. And sometimes... it follows."

Arvind clenched his fists. "So it's just an old legend, then?"

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The priest's expression did not change. "Legends do not leave footprints in the ashes."

Arvind swallowed, suddenly remembering the shadow he feared he had seen, the whispers he could no longer dismiss. His pulse quickened.

Before he could ask more, a shrill scream shattered the air outside.

A sound filled with terror.

Without thinking, Arvind rushed toward the entrance.

And what he saw made his blood run cold.

## 2.4 Echoes of the Past - *The Second Cry*

The scream echoed through the narrow stone streets like a shockwave. Arvind sprinted from the temple's steps, heart pounding, Pandit Somnath's warning still ringing in his ears: "*The Masan does not like to be noticed.*"

A crowd had gathered near the old village well. People stood frozen, whispering hurried prayers, their eyes wide with dread. Arvind pushed through them, the crowd parting just enough to reveal a girl—no older than seven—collapsed on the ground.

Her limbs were limp. Her eyes fluttered but did not open.

Her mother knelt beside her, weeping softly, brushing damp hair from the child's face. The girl's skin glistened with sweat, her chest rising and falling in shallow, irregular breaths.

"What happened?" Arvind asked, crouching beside them.

"She was playing near the old shrine," a man said behind him, voice hushed.

"She came running," added another, "said she saw someone—crying."

A woman's voice, older, trembling: "The woman in white. She's returned."

Arvind's throat went dry. He looked at the girl's hands—burned. Not fresh blisters, but older, like skin that had healed and cracked over days. Her bare feet were streaked with black soot.

The girl stirred. A hush fell over the crowd.

Her lips moved.

Arvind leaned closer, bracing for what she might say.

"She... was calling your name," the girl whispered, barely audible.

Arvind's blood ran cold.

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“Who?” he asked, but her eyes drifted shut again, and her head lolled to the side.

A woman in the crowd began to cry. Someone muttered a prayer. Another pointed silently at Arvind before turning away.

That night, Jharigaon fell under a hush that even the wind dared not break. No lamps were lit. Doors remained bolted. The temple bell did not ring.

Arvind sat alone in his room, the oil lamp flickering low, casting shaky shadows across the walls. Nandan had gone out to meet Mohan Lal—one of the few men in the village rumored to know more than Somnath. Arvind didn’t want to be alone, but he didn’t ask him to stay.

He stared at the door.

And then he saw it.

Not imagined.

Not a trick of shadow or light.

**A handprint.**

Blackened. Burned into the surface of the wood.

The fingers were long, thin—almost skeletal. Curled slightly, like they had been **clawing**, not knocking.

And below it, in crumbling streaks of ash:

His name.

## The First Omen

### 3.1 The First Omen - *The Cradle of Fear*

The evening air carried the scent of damp earth and woodsmoke as Arvind walked along the narrow dirt path leading home. The village was unnaturally silent. Even the cicadas, which usually hummed in a never-ending chorus, had gone quiet.

He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

The memory of her whisper haunted him.

Not the girl’s, but the woman’s. The one in white.

“She was calling your name.”

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As he neared the house, he saw Nandan waiting on the veranda, arms crossed tightly across his chest. His younger brother's face looked older than usual—tighter, like something had been gnawing at him from the inside.

"You went to the school," Nandan said quietly. Not a question.

Arvind stopped in his tracks. "I had to. It's my job."

Nandan let out a bitter laugh that didn't reach his eyes. "Your job? You think teaching is the only reason you were sent here?"

Arvind frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Nandan sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "It means you don't understand the place you've come back to. That school... it's not the same anymore. It hasn't been for a long time."

He gestured toward the tree line behind the house. "The land beneath that school was never meant to carry life. You're sleeping too close to something we were raised to avoid."

Arvind's stomach twisted. "Are you saying what happened last night... the knocking, the crying—was from there?"

Nandan hesitated. "Not just from there. It's like the ghat, the school, even this house—they're all part of something that's spreading."

Arvind stepped up onto the veranda. "Spreading?"

Nandan looked away. "I've heard it too. The knocking. The crying. I just didn't want to believe it."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this earlier?"

Nandan's voice dropped. "Because if I had, you might've left. And if you leave now—after she's marked you—it might be worse."

Arvind froze. "She?"

Nandan nodded. "The woman in white. The one you saw. She's not a ghost. She's the warning."

The brothers stood in silence for a long moment. Then Nandan turned toward the door. "Come inside. Lock everything."

Inside, the oil lamp burned low, its light shaky. The walls seemed to press in around them as Nandan dropped the wooden latch behind the door. Shadows danced along the walls, but Arvind couldn't shake the feeling that one of them didn't belong.

They sat at the old kitchen table.

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“You heard it too, didn’t you?” Arvind asked. “Last night?”

Nandan didn’t answer at first. Then, quietly: “Everyone hears it. But no one talks about it.”

Arvind leaned forward. “Why not?”

“Because once you say it out loud... once you admit it’s real...” He trailed off. “That’s when it starts getting closer.”

A silence stretched between them.

Then—

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Slow. Measured. Too deliberate to be the wind.

Both brothers froze.

Arvind turned toward the door. A shadow moved behind the curtain, long and unmoving.

Then came the sound that made his blood run cold—

A woman.

Sobbing.

## 3.2: The First Omen - *The Old Man’s Warning*

That night, long after the knocking had stopped and the sobbing had faded, Arvind found himself unable to sleep.

He hadn’t slept. Just sat on the edge of his cot, listening to the silence press against the walls. The windows were shut tight. The door bolted. Yet it still felt like something was standing just outside—watching. Waiting.

When the first light crept over the treetops, he stood. He needed answers. Nandan wouldn’t talk, and the village spoke only in silence. But one man might still tell the truth.

He needed answers. Nandan had said enough to frighten him, but not enough to explain. The village was hiding something. Always had.

There was one man who might speak the truth.

**Chhagan Baba.**

# Masan

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The oldest living resident of Jharigaon. Half-blind, mostly silent, and feared for the things he remembered. People said he mumbled to shadows. That he once buried a cursed body himself.

Arvind waited until first light before making his way to the edge of the village. Chhagan Baba's hut sat near the forest line—far from the others, almost touching the wild. The path was narrow, overgrown with weeds, as if even the earth wanted to forget it.

He knocked.

Nothing.

Then came the sound of shuffling. The door opened just a crack. Two clouded eyes peered out.

"You've come back," the old man rasped. "Why?"

"I need to know what's happening," Arvind said. "About the woman. The knocking. The girl who said she was calling my name."

Chhagan Baba's eyes narrowed. "And now you want to believe?"

"I never stopped believing," Arvind said quietly. "I just forgot how to be afraid."

That seemed to please the old man. He opened the door wider.

Inside, the hut smelled of burnt herbs and damp wood. Dried chilies hung from the beams. An oil lamp flickered low beside a wall covered in black smudges—fingerprints, it seemed, pressed into mud.

Arvind sat on the floor across from him.

"You want to know about the crying woman?" Chhagan Baba whispered. "The Masan?"

Arvind's chest tightened at the name. He nodded once.

"She doesn't cry for help," the old man said. "She cries to see who listens. And those who listen too long—she follows them."

Arvind said nothing.

"She's not a ghost. Ghosts want closure. Masan wants echo. She repeats pain. Mirrors death. Every life she touches becomes a reflection of another one lost."

The room felt colder now. The lamp's flame shrank.

"Why me?" Arvind asked.

Chhagan Baba pointed toward him, his crooked finger shaking. "Because you're part of this place. Your blood remembers. The land knows your name."

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

“I don’t understand.”

“You will,” the old man said. “But the truth will cost you. It always does.”

Outside, a low moan rose from the forest line.

Arvind turned sharply. Just the wind?

But when he looked back, Chhagan Baba was staring at the doorway—stone still, mouth slightly open.

Then he whispered something that made Arvind’s skin crawl.

**“She already followed one Joshi into the fire. She’ll follow another.”**

---

### 3.3: The First Omen - *The Path of Ash*

The next morning brought no comfort.

The mist hadn’t lifted. The air still hung heavy, thick with the memory of the knocking. Arvind hadn’t spoken much since returning from Chhagan Baba’s hut. His mind replayed the old man’s words again and again.

*“She already followed one Joshi into the fire. She’ll follow another.”*

He found Nandan out near the cowshed, tending to the animals with robotic movements. Arvind stood in silence, watching his younger brother struggle with the simplest tasks — tying a knot, lifting a bucket. Like the weight of something invisible had finally settled on him.

“You knew,” Arvind said quietly.

Nandan didn’t turn around.

“You knew about Ma,” Arvind continued. “You knew what really happened.”

Nandan’s shoulders tensed.

“You lied to me for years,” Arvind said. “And now you want me to stay silent while whatever this is circles closer every night?”

Nandan finally turned. His face was pale, drawn. “I was trying to protect you.”

Arvind stepped closer. “Then stop protecting me. Take me there.”

Nandan didn’t ask where.

He just shook his head. “It’s not safe.”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Arvind's voice dropped. "She already knows my name."

A long silence passed between them. Then Nandan looked away and muttered, "Get the lantern."

—

They left just before dusk. Not because they wanted to, but because Nandan insisted — **"If we go after dark, we won't come back."**

The path was narrow and overgrown, winding away from the village and toward the part of the forest no one named aloud. The deeper they walked, the more Arvind noticed how the trees leaned inward, as if whispering to each other.

"Why did you never tell me?" Arvind asked.

Nandan's voice was brittle. "Because the truth kills faster than lies."

After nearly half an hour, they reached the edge of a dry riverbed. Across it, barely visible through the trees, was a clearing. A blackened patch of earth. Twisted remains of wood. A rusted iron trident half-buried in the soil.

"The burning ghat," Nandan said, his voice hollow. "Or what's left of it."

Arvind stood still, staring at the place. The air smelled of smoke that shouldn't still exist.

Something had happened here.

Something had stayed.

He took one step forward.

And the wind stopped.

---

## 3.4: The First Omen - *Footsteps in the Ash*

The clearing was deathly quiet.

The trees thinned around the burning ghat, their trunks blackened at the edges as if scorched by something long ago. What remained of the cremation ground was scattered — broken logs, ashes hardened into strange patterns, and the faint outline of where pyres once stood.

Arvind stepped lightly across the earth. The ground was soft and strangely warm beneath his shoes.

"Why is it warm?" he asked.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Nandan didn't answer. He was staring straight ahead.

It smelled of old smoke. Not fresh, but lingering — like a memory trying to stay alive.

Arvind crouched beside a mound of ash and ran his hand just above it. No breeze. No heat. But something in the stillness pulled at him.

That's when he noticed them.

## Footprints.

They weren't made of mud or dust. They were **burned into the earth** — each step charred deeper than the last, as though something had walked away from a pyre still on fire.

"Are you seeing this?" he asked, his voice low.

Nandan gave a small nod. "They say... whatever it is, it doesn't stay buried. It walks."

The prints led away from the center of the ghat, arcing toward the treeline. Arvind followed them with his eyes, unable to stop.

Each step was precise. Small. Barefoot. But impossibly deep — **burned in, not pressed.**

Then came the sound.

Not loud. Not sharp. Just... a **dragging** noise. Something brushing through the ash. A brittle shift of weight.

Both men froze.

The ash near the pyre shifted. Just slightly. Like something beneath had **exhaled.**

Arvind's breath caught.

His mind screamed for a reason. Wind? Settling earth? A small animal?

Then he saw it — slowly forming in the ash beside the last footprint.

A handprint.

Long fingers. Thin. Blackened. As if something had knelt there... and pressed down.

Arvind stepped back. "No..."

The handprint was **fresh.**

And it hadn't been there a moment ago.

They weren't alone.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

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## 3.5: The First Omen -*The Mark of Masan*

Arvind took a step back from the fresh handprint.

It hadn't been there a moment ago.

Nandan stood behind him, holding the lantern like a shield. His knuckles were white on the handle. He didn't speak—didn't even blink—just stared at the handprint like he'd seen it before.

Then Nandan whispered, "We need to go."

His voice cracked, like it hurt to say it out loud. But even as he said it, he didn't move. He was frozen too.

Something had changed. The air had turned colder. Not just temperature—**energy**. Like walking into a room where someone had just died.

Arvind looked past the last footprint... toward the trees.

There—just at the edge of the light—something moved.

At first it was a ripple. A blur. Then a shape.

**Tall. Thin. Wrapped in scorched cloth.**

Its limbs hung strangely, as if pulled by invisible strings. The face—if it had one—was hidden beneath layers of soot-streaked fabric.

It didn't walk. It just... appeared. Closer with every blink.

**Arvind couldn't breathe.**

His body refused to run. His legs locked. His thoughts scattered.

Beside him, Nandan stumbled backward, nearly dropping the lantern. "Don't look at it," he muttered, voice hoarse. "Don't let it see your eyes."

But it was too late. Arvind was already locked in.

Then the thing raised an arm.

And pointed.

Right at him.

A single, charred finger stretched in his direction. The gesture was not of warning.

It was a **claim**.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

**Arvind Joshi.**

His name did not need to be spoken aloud. It was known. Etched.

His vision swam. Something inside his chest felt like it shifted—like a thread had been cut, and something else was pulling it taut.

He stumbled back, clutching his ribs.

The figure didn't move. It didn't have to.

Then, from somewhere between the trees, came a sound—not a cry, not a word—a **breath**. Drawn out. Damp. Like lungs that had forgotten how to be alive.

And just beneath the breath, a whisper:

*"You were never supposed to leave..."*

The light of the lantern didn't flicker. It **dimmed**—unnaturally, like it was being swallowed.

The ghat blurred around them. The trees twisted. The world leaned.

Arvind collapsed to one knee.

In the ash beneath him, something had been written.

## **ARVIND**

*(In long, curling letters.*

*Formed from soot.*

*Still warm.)*

**Nandan grabbed his arm. "Bhai..."**

His voice cracked. *"I think... she's done waiting."*

His grip trembled—not from cold, but from something worse.

A terrible knowing.

Arvind didn't remember running.

Only the sound of his own breath, as he and Nandan fled back toward the village.

---

## **The Forbidden Grounds**

### **4.1 The Forbidden Grounds - *The Silence After***

They didn't speak on the way back.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The path from the ghat to the village, which had seemed eerie on the way down, now felt wrong in a new way. The silence wasn't just silence anymore — it was **avoidance**. A space they were both afraid to fill with words.

Nandan still had the lantern in his hand, swinging slightly with each step. The flame had gone out long ago, but he hadn't let go.

By the time they reached the outer edge of the village, dawn was beginning to break, but the light brought no comfort. Arvind's legs felt heavy. His thoughts were even heavier.

Masan hadn't chased them.

She didn't have to.

They entered the house without a word. Nandan bolted the door behind them, then stood there for a long time, his back to Arvind. When he finally turned, his face looked sunken — like he hadn't slept in days.

"I'll make tea," he said quietly, then disappeared into the kitchen.

Arvind sat on the old wooden bench in the main room. The same spot where he'd dropped his bag days ago, when he'd first arrived. Back when he thought this would just be about education. About giving something back.

Now, all he could see were footprints in ash and fingers scratching through the past.

---

The tea sat untouched between them.

Nandan lit an oil lamp, though the morning light was already creeping through the shutters. Still, the house felt dim. It wasn't the kind of dark you could chase out with a flame.

Finally, Arvind spoke. "Do you think she'll come here?"

Nandan didn't answer immediately. Then: "She already has."

There was no panic in his voice. Just certainty. Resignation.

Arvind nodded slowly. "So this is what happened to Ma?"

Nandan's eyes flicked up, then away. "Baba told you she died sick."

"He lied."

"He tried to make it kinder."

Arvind stared into the lamplight, watching its flicker stretch and shrink. "What really happened?"

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

“She started hearing things,” Nandan said. “First it was the crying — always after dark. Then came the scratching at the back door. At first Baba told her it was cats, rats... anything but what it really was.”

“Then she stopped sleeping. Started talking to shadows. She’d stare at corners of the room like someone was standing there.”

“Some mornings I’d find her by the river, barefoot. She’d say she heard *someone calling her name from the ghat*. She never said the name. Never said what she saw.”

He swallowed. “But I think she knew what was waiting.”

Arvind’s chest tightened. The memory of her — thin, frail, always tired — took on a different shape now. It wasn’t illness. It was something else eating away at her.

“One night, she left the house. Said she needed air.”

“They found her scarf two days later — half-buried in ash by the ghat. Still warm.”

“No body. No footprints. Just silence.”

---

A thud snapped them both out of it.

Something had hit the front door.

They exchanged a glance.

Arvind stood first.

He opened it slowly. The cold air stung his skin.

No one was there.

But on the veranda, scattered just outside the threshold, was a **trail of ash**.

Not spilled — placed. Deliberate.

It led from the steps to the door, then stopped at his feet.

Nandan joined him, silent. His eyes dropped to the ground.

There, in the center of the ash, was something pressed into the wood.

**A second handprint.**

Smaller. Curled slightly inward. As if it had **clawed** its way in.

He didn’t speak.

Didn’t need to.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Masan hadn't stayed at the ghat.

**She had followed them home.**

## 4.2 The Forbidden Grounds - *The Name of the Dead*

Arvind didn't sleep.

He sat near the shuttered window, staring at the thin line of dawn light creeping in through the cracks in the wood. The memory of the handprint — burned into their doorstep — stayed with him like a splinter lodged in his chest.

The trail of ash outside remained untouched. Neither he nor Nandan had swept it away. Not out of fear — not anymore — but because some things **shouldn't** be disturbed.

The house stayed quiet. Nandan eventually fell asleep in the corner, wrapped in a blanket, the lantern's flame barely flickering beside him.

Arvind watched it burn low.

And when the sky began to lighten, he stood.

He knew where he had to go.

---

Pandit Bansal's house stood near the far edge of the village, tucked behind a grove of leaning trees. The kind of place even kids avoided when playing. Too quiet. Too still.

Arvind remembered him as the man who kept to shadows during festivals. Who didn't smile during prayers. A man who knew things no one wanted to hear.

When Arvind knocked, the village was still wrapped in the hush of early morning. Smoke rose from distant chimneys, and the air still carried last night's chill.

The knock echoed.

Silence.

He knocked again. "Pandit-ji, it's Arvind Joshi. I need your help."

A rustle behind the door.

Then a creak.

The door cracked open just enough for one sunken, sleepless eye to peer out.

"You should not be here," the priest muttered.

"I don't have anywhere else to go."

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Bansal stared at him a long moment. Then, slowly, he opened the door and stepped aside.

---

The inside smelled of ash and herbs. Dried garlands hung from the walls, and an oil lamp flickered beneath a soot-covered altar. No furniture, just rugs and low cushions. A place where time had stopped.

Bansal poured water into two metal cups and set them on the floor. Then he sat, cross-legged, without a word.

“You know about Masan,” Arvind said quietly.

The priest didn’t look up.

“The village fears what it doesn’t understand,” he said. “But fear is shallow. You’ve seen deeper now.”

Arvind nodded once.

“The Masan,” Bansal continued, “was not born a spirit. She was left behind.”

He opened a small cloth pouch from the altar and removed a singed scrap of fabric — barely more than ash. He placed it carefully between them.

“This belonged to the last person marked before your mother.”

Arvind stiffened.

“Don’t ask their name,” Bansal said. “We stopped saying the names. The moment they’re spoken, she listens harder.”

Arvind swallowed. “So why my family? Why does she come after us?”

Bansal’s eyes finally met his. “Because you left.”

Arvind frowned. “So did others.”

“They were strangers. You were born here. Fed from this land. You carry more than memory — you carry threads.”

He tapped the floor once. “When you left, a thread frayed. She’s been pulling it back ever since.”

Arvind exhaled shakily. “Is there a way to stop her?”

“You cannot stop her,” Bansal said. “But you can **return what was never buried.**”

Arvind didn’t understand.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The priest leaned forward. “The first fire — the one that created her — it was never completed. Her ashes were scattered, not sanctified. Her name was erased, not mourned.”

Arvind looked down at the burned cloth again.

“Then that’s what’s needed?” he asked. “A ritual?”

Bansal didn’t answer right away.

Then, quietly: “To settle the dead, you must first walk where they burned.”

---

Suddenly, both men turned toward the door.

No knock.

No sound.

But something pressed in — like a presence just outside the threshold.

Arvind didn’t breathe.

Neither did Bansal.

Then the priest spoke again, his voice barely above a breath.

“She remembers her pain.”

“And now... she remembers you.”

## 4.3: The Forbidden Grounds: *The Ritual of Ashes*

The morning sun filtered through the cracked shutters, but inside Pandit Bansal’s home, the light felt dimmer. Like it struggled to enter.

Arvind sat with his back straight, fists clenched in his lap.

“She remembers me?” he repeated.

The priest gave a slow nod. “She remembers your family. You, your mother... even before her, there were signs.”

Arvind’s voice was tight. “What kind of signs?”

Bansal took a breath. “Your mother wasn’t born in Jharigaon. She came from a village across the ridge. Married young. Settled here. Quiet woman. Raised you boys. Kept the home steady.”

He paused, then continued more softly. “She was like any other mother here. Until the last winter she was alive.”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

“Something started changing in her. Not suddenly — slowly, like smoke seeping under a door.”

“She would wake before dawn. Sit by the fire. Not cooking, not praying. Just... whispering.”

At first, we thought it was just exhaustion. A woman trying to keep her house running. Two small boys. A quiet husband. Everyone assumed she just needed silence

“No one stopped her. Back then, people feared shame more than spirits.”

Arvind's breath caught. He remembered how she had stopped humming. How the warmth in the house had faded, even when the fire was burning.

“She never said a word,” Bansal continued. “But something had her. She was going back and forth between this world and something else.”

“Then one morning, she was gone.”

Arvind looked at the priest, frozen.

“We found her shawl by the fire pit. Still warm. No blood. No tracks. Just ash. After that, the knocking started.”

---

There was a long silence between them.

Then Arvind asked the question he had been circling since the moment he returned to Jharigaon.

“They told me she died of illness.”

Bansal nodded slowly. “She was ill. But not in the way doctors understand.”

---

The priest stood and walked to a shelf. He pulled down a shallow clay bowl covered with a cloth and returned to the altar.

Inside was a small amount of ash — dark, dry, unnaturally fine.

“These were recovered from the edge of the river five years ago. I believe they're what your mother was trying to use.”

Arvind reached toward the bowl.

“Don't touch it,” Bansal warned sharply.

Arvind stopped.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

“You can carry it. You can complete what she began. But if you touch it with bare skin, she’ll know.”

Arvind stared into the bowl. The ash didn’t move — but it felt alive.

---

“What do I have to do?”

The priest walked to the altar and lit a fresh wick.

“There is a place behind the ghat,” he said. “An old banyan with roots that never stop moving. It’s where the first fire was lit. Long before your time. Even before mine.”

“That’s where you take it?”

Arvind nodded once. “And then?”

“Then you bury the ash. But not alone.”

He looked up.

“You’ll need someone who remembers her name.”

Arvind’s breath caught.

“You mean—?”

“Yes,” Bansal said. “Your father.”

## 4.4: The Forbidden Grounds: *The One Who Spoke Her Name*

The clay bowl rested on the wooden shelf in Arvind’s room, wrapped tightly in two layers of cloth, as Pandit Bansal had instructed. He hadn’t dared touch it again after returning home. Still, even from across the room, he could feel it—like it had weight beyond its form. Like it listened.

Nandan sat on the edge of the cot, staring at the shuttered window, tapping his foot against the floor. The silence between the brothers was thick, but not uncomfortable. Both were turning over the same question in their minds.

Their father.

---

“He never said her name after she vanished,” Arvind said quietly. “Not once. Not to me. Not even when we were kids asking what happened.”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Nandan nodded. "I thought it was grief. Or guilt."

"I thought it was fear."

They looked at each other.

Neither of them really knew the man who had raised them in the years after their mother's disappearance. He had been there—but hollow. He had fed them, clothed them, nodded when spoken to. But something inside him had left with her.

---

That evening, they walked to the northern slope, where the fields ended and the forest began to reclaim the earth.

This was the place they returned to every year for their father's *shraddh*—the annual remembrance ritual. A lone neem tree grew here, crooked and tall, its roots coiling like fingers beneath the soil. This was where Nandan had scattered part of his ashes after the cremation.

There was no stone. No fire pit. Just the tree. And memory.

The ghat was still there—barely. Overgrown. Feared. Since the night their mother vanished, no one in the village had wanted to use it. But when their father died, the family had no choice.

"They used the far end," Nandan said, almost absently, as if reading his brother's thoughts. "At dawn. No priest. Just a small fire and the four of us."

Arvind nodded slowly. "I should've been there."

"You came the next day," Nandan said. "He knew you tried."

They stood in silence beneath the neem tree.

---

Arvind reached into his coat pocket and took out the letter Pandit Bansal had given him. The paper was worn now. Folded so many times it held its creases like scars.

He read the words aloud:

*"They say the dead don't rest without fire or name. She had neither. That was my fault. If she returns... I will speak her name, even if it kills me."*

---

Nandan crouched again, cleared the leaves near the roots. "So how do we find it?"

"Maybe we don't have to," Arvind murmured.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He knelt beside him, placed the letter gently at the base of the tree, and unwrapped just the top layer of the cloth bundle.

Not fully. Just enough to expose the dark edge of ash inside.

Then he said softly, "You promised. Now say it."

---

The wind stirred.

Leaves rustled around them, but the tree itself didn't move. Not even a creak from its bark.

Nandan placed his palm on the soil, as if steadying the ground or bracing himself.

And then—

A sound.

Not a voice.

A breath.

A shape that moved through the air, not as vibration, but as weight. As knowing.

A name.

Soft. Unspoken. But understood.

It came not from the sky, not from the ground—but from somewhere in between. A memory spoken aloud by something without a mouth.

Their mother's name.

The one neither of them had dared say in almost two decades.

---

"Did you hear that?" Arvind asked.

Nandan's hand didn't move. "No," he whispered. "But it's in my head."

Arvind's chest rose and fell. "Then I'm not imagining it."

"No," Nandan said, eyes locked on the neem bark. "You're remembering it."

They stood together in the silence—until it wasn't silent anymore.

From the direction of the ghat, beyond the broken path and brittle trees, the wind picked up.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Not howling.

Calling.

## 4.5 The Forbidden Grounds: *The Thing in the Dark*

The darkness inside the priest's house felt alive. It coiled around them like something sentient, pressing against their skin with an unnatural weight. The only sound was the sharp intake of Arvind's breath and the rapid muttering of Bansal's prayers.

Outside, the unseen thing howled. Not with human rage or sorrow, but with a sound that scraped at the walls of sanity—high-pitched, layered, *wrong*.

Then—

The knocking started again.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

This time, it was not just at the door.

It came from the **walls**.

From the **roof**.

From the **floor beneath their feet**.

Arvind clenched his fists, forcing himself to stay still. His heart pounded against his ribs, each beat hammering the same thought into his mind—*It wants me to open the door. It wants me to let it in.*

Bansal moved swiftly. He grabbed a pouch of red vermilion powder and began drawing symbols onto the wooden door, his fingers moving with practiced urgency.

**“Stay inside the circle!”** he ordered.

Arvind barely registered the command before the house **lurched**.

The walls *breathed*. The wooden beams groaned, twisting as if something massive was pressing against them from the outside. The entire house shuddered, and Arvind stumbled back into the priest's protective circle.

The voice outside returned, softer now. Calculated.

**“Bhaiya... open the door... I'm hurt... please...”**

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Arvind gritted his teeth. The longer he listened, the more it sounded *exactly* like Nandan. Every pause, every inflection.

Then came something worse.

A second voice.

His mother's.

**"Beta... it's me. Please, just a little... just a little bit."**

The door *bowed inward* as if an immense force was pressing against it.

**"They are not real,"** Bansal hissed. His hands moved faster, the chalk dust of sacred symbols spreading over the wooden planks. **"It is a Masan. It steals voices, faces, memories. It knows what will break you. Do not believe its lies."**

The voices outside continued, each whisper curling through the cracks in the wood like the touch of unseen fingers.

Then, suddenly—**silence.**

The night outside grew unnaturally still. No wind. No insects. No distant village sounds.

Nothing.

Then—

A single knock.

Soft. Almost... amused.

Arvind's blood turned to ice.

And then it *laughed*.

Low at first. Then rising. A sound filled with mirthless, jagged delight.

**"You will come to me soon, Arvind. They always do."**

A shadow **passed over the window**, blocking even the faint moonlight that had crept through.

Then—

The pressure lifted. The walls settled. The air inside the house slowly warmed, as if the presence had simply lost interest.

Bansal sagged, exhaustion overtaking his features. His hands trembled as he reached for a jug of water, drinking in desperate gulps.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Arvind, still shaking, managed to find his voice. “What the hell was that?”

The priest wiped his mouth and looked at him with grim certainty.

**“The Masan has marked you.”**

Arvind’s stomach dropped.

Bansal stood up, moving to a wooden chest in the corner of the room. He opened it and retrieved something wrapped in old, yellowed cloth. When he unwrapped it, Arvind saw an iron locket—its surface etched with ancient symbols.

“Wear this,” Bansal said, pressing it into his palm. “It won’t stop it. But it may slow it down.”

Arvind swallowed hard, his mouth dry. “Slow *what* down?”

The priest’s expression was grim. “The hunt.”

Outside, the night remained eerily silent.

And in the distance—just beyond the edge of the forest—**something watched.**

## The Far End of the Ghat

### 5.1 The Far End of the Ghat - *The Old Manuscript*

The morning light did little to erase the horrors of the previous night. Arvind sat on the wooden bench outside Bansal’s house, his fingers absently tracing the iron locket that now hung around his neck. The priest sat beside him, a thick, dusty tome resting on his lap.

“This,” Bansal said, flipping open the brittle pages, “is the only written record of the Masan that I know of.”

Arvind leaned forward, scanning the faded ink. The script was ancient, handwritten in an old dialect of Sanskrit mixed with Garhwali. The pages were filled with disturbing illustrations—figures standing in flames, shadowed creatures lurking in the forest, and a skeletal entity with hollow eyes and unnaturally long fingers.

Arvind’s voice was hoarse. “Tell me everything.”

Bansal sighed, rubbing his temples before beginning.

“The Masan is not a ghost in the usual sense. It is not a spirit that lingers after death. It is something far older, far worse. A *chhalawa*, a being that feeds on grief and despair.”

He turned the page, revealing a haunting depiction—a **young boy standing beside a burning pyre, his face twisted in agony, his eyes black voids.**

Arvind swallowed hard. “Who is he?”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Bansal's jaw tightened. "The first Masan."

A gust of wind rustled the trees, as if the forest itself was listening.

"This legend dates back over three hundred years," Bansal continued. "The story speaks of a boy—an orphan who lived on the edge of Jharigaon. His mother was accused of witchcraft and burned alive at the ghat."

Arvind felt a chill creep up his spine.

Bansal's voice dropped to a whisper. "The villagers refused to give him the last rites. They believed he was cursed—**that his mother had passed her dark magic to him.**"

He turned the page again. This time, the illustration showed the same boy, **kneeling beside the smoldering remains of the pyre, his hands raised in a silent scream.**

"No one buried his mother's ashes," Bansal said grimly. "Her spirit remained unatoned. And that is how the curse began."

Arvind exhaled slowly. "And the boy?"

Bansal hesitated before answering.

"The records say that he never spoke again. He wandered the forests, the village, the burning ghats... watching, waiting. Until, one night, the first deaths began."

Arvind clenched his fists. "What deaths?"

"The villagers who had burned his mother—**they were found with their bones shattered, their faces frozen in terror.** Their bodies were untouched, but their souls... gone."

A shiver ran down Arvind's spine. "And the boy?"

Bansal met his gaze, his expression grim.

"He was seen only once more. Standing beside his mother's pyre. Whispering to the flames."

The priest closed the book.

"And from that night on... the Masan was born."

Outside, the wind howled through the trees.

And somewhere in the distance, the sound of faint knocking began again.

**Knock. Knock. Knock.**

## 5.2 The Far End of the Ghat - *What Follows Ash*

The word stayed with them.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

"Next."

Neither of them spoke as they stared at the burned writing. It hadn't been there before—Arvind was certain. And it hadn't been carved with any tool. The burn was too clean, too deliberate. Like it had risen from the stone itself.

"Let's go," Nandan said finally, his voice low.

They left the bundle in the center of the blackened platform. Whatever was inside it had stopped shifting, but it felt like a pause, not an ending. A deep breath before a scream.

---

Back in the village, the night had swallowed every sound.

No lanterns flickered from the homes. Doors were bolted. Windows dark. It was as if the entire village had folded in on itself, bracing for something none of them would speak aloud.

Nandan and Arvind entered their house in silence. Arvind locked the door behind them. Nandan didn't say anything, didn't even sit. He paced, arms crossed, jaw clenched.

Then he stopped and said, "I don't think it worked."

Arvind dropped his bag by the door. "We gave her back to the fire. We did what Bansal said."

"Yeah?" Nandan turned to him. "Then why do I still feel like we're being watched?"

---

There was no answer.

And then, the light went out.

The lamp on the shelf — full, trimmed, steady — blinked once and died.

Not a flicker.

Just off.

They both froze.

Then came the sound.

From outside the wall.

Dragging. Slow. Heavy.

Like something wet being pulled across dry wood.

It circled the house once.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Twice.

And then—

**Knock.**

Not at the door.

But on the back wall again.

**Knock.**

**Knock.**

Arvind stepped forward instinctively.

“Don’t,” Nandan hissed. “You saw what happened last time.”

“I just want to know if it’s her.”

“You *know* it’s not her.”

---

Silence followed.

Then a voice.

“You tried. But it’s not enough.”

It didn’t sound like a woman. Or a man. Or anything human.

It was layered. Like it came from different mouths trying to say the same words at once.

Then another knock.

And a second voice:

“She wasn’t the end.”

This one was clearer.

Familiar.

It was their father’s voice.

## **5.3 The Far End of the Ghat: *The Fire Never Went Out***

The voice was gone.

So was the knock.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

But the air inside the house was wrong. Dense. Tinted with the smell of old fire — not the smoke of burning wood, but of something ancient. Something scorched and buried long ago.

Arvind didn't speak for a long time.

He just stood near the back wall, staring at the spot the voice had come from. Nandan stayed near the door, watching him closely.

"What did it mean?" Nandan finally asked.

Arvind didn't turn. "That we didn't finish it."

"The ashes? We burned them."

"No," Arvind whispered. "We returned them. But I never said her name."

---

He turned now, his eyes darker than before.

"Bansal said she had neither fire nor name. I gave her one... but not the other."

"You heard it," Nandan said. "We both did."

"But I didn't say it."

His voice cracked. "Not aloud. Not to the ghat. Not to her."

Nandan was quiet for a long time. Then he said, "So say it now."

Arvind hesitated. His jaw clenched. "And if saying it brings her back instead of setting her free?"

The question landed hard.

Because neither of them really knew what they had called — or what waited for them now.

---

That night, they didn't sleep.

They sat in the room with the oil lamp between them, watching the shadows stretch and crawl with every flicker. Arvind held the letter from Bansal in one hand. The writing had begun to fade — not from time, but as if it were being erased by something unseen.

The same sentence repeating in his mind:

*"If she returns, I will speak her name."*

---

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

It wasn't until just before dawn that he stood.

Nandan stirred on the mat. "Where are you going?"

Arvind didn't answer. He opened the front door slowly and stepped out.

The village was still asleep. Or pretending to be.

He walked back toward the ghat.

Alone.

---

The sky was just beginning to color — not light, but that strange grey where night still holds its breath. Mist clung to the ground in long sheets, covering the path.

When he reached the ghat, nothing had moved.

The bundle was still where they left it. The ashes, untouched.

Arvind stepped closer. His breath came in clouds. The cold here was worse — not natural. Empty.

He knelt on the scorched ground where they had placed the ashes the day before. The soot was undisturbed — but the air above it still carried weight.

And for the first time, he said her name.

Out loud.

"Amrita."

The name cracked the silence like breaking ice.

---

At first, nothing.

Then—

A sound behind him.

Not a footstep.

**A breath.**

Slow. Close.

He didn't turn around.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

"I'm not afraid," he said, more to himself than anything else.

Another breath — closer.

He stood. Turned.

No one.

But the bundle was gone.

The stones were cold.

And burned into the scorched ground, clear and deliberate:

**"Now you've given her back. But who takes her place?"**

## 5.4 The Far End of the Ghat - *The One Chosen*

The words glared up from the scorched ground like an open wound.

*Now you've given her back.*

*But who takes her place?*

Arvind stared at them, unable to move. The ashes were gone. The flame never returned. And now the earth had offered an answer he didn't understand — but feared he soon would.

Behind him, a soft crunch of leaves.

He turned.

Nandan stood at the edge of the clearing, his breath visible in the early morning chill. He must've followed, just far enough behind.

"You said it," Nandan whispered.

Arvind nodded. "I did."

"Did she answer?"

"I think so."

They both looked back at the words on the ground.

"Then what does that mean?" Nandan asked quietly. "Who takes her place?"

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

They walked home in silence.

When they reached the house, something felt different. Not wrong. Just... still. As if the house was listening. Waiting.

Inside, the brass bowl Bansal had given them — the one used in the ash ritual — was cracked clean through. No one had touched it.

On the floor, just beneath the table, they found something neither had seen before:

**A single thread of red cloth. Torn. Burned at the edge.**

It matched the fabric the ashes had been wrapped in.

But now it was here.

Inside.

---

That evening, as dusk crept through the sky like a slow bruise, Arvind sat on the edge of the cot, staring at his hands. He had done what he was told. He had given her back. Said her name.

So why did it feel like something worse had begun?

Nandan was at the window, silent.

Then he said, without turning, "You saw what it wrote."

Arvind nodded slowly. "You think it meant... one of us?"

Nandan didn't answer.

Because they both already knew.

---

That night, the knocking came again.

But not at the back wall.

**It came from inside.**

Soft. Slow.

From under the floorboards.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Then a voice:

“I didn’t ask to return.

But you called me.

So now you choose.”

---

The air grew heavy.

Nandan backed toward the kitchen.

Arvind stood in the center of the room, breath shallow, the floor cold under his bare feet.

He felt it before he saw it — a change in the air near the door. Like someone stepping into the room behind him.

He turned.

The door was shut.

But a figure stood in front of it.

Shrouded in shadow. Wrapped in rags.

Arvind froze. “Who are you?”

The voice that replied wasn’t one voice.

It was many. Woven together. Male. Female. Child. Whispered.

**“I am the debt.”**

## **5.5 The Far End of the Ghat: *What the Debt Demands***

The figure didn’t move. It didn’t need to.

Its presence filled the room like water flooding a sealed jar — slowly suffocating everything inside. The air was thick, hard to breathe. The shadows around it seemed to crawl, folding inward like burnt paper.

Arvind couldn’t speak. He felt the name he had spoken — his mother’s — still sitting on his tongue like something sharp.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Nandan was pressed against the far wall, fists clenched, eyes locked on the thing. He didn't blink.

"I am the debt," it said again.

The voice rippled through the floorboards, into the walls, into their bones.

Then it stepped forward.

One foot — bare, blackened, and cracked — pressed into the wooden floor, leaving a trail of ash behind.

It wasn't human.

It wasn't spirit.

It was both. And neither.

Its face was nothing but shape — shifting features: at one moment, their mother; then their father; then a face they didn't know. A woman. A man. A child. All flickering like dying flames.

---

And in that flicker — face after face — something clicked.

These weren't just visions.

They were names the Masan had already taken.

His **father**, who never recovered after her death.

The **previous school principal**, who had died without reason and left the job cursed.

The man who drowned in the river, whose skin bore burn scars no water could explain.

His **mother**.

And now — **Nandan's** face.

Arvind's stomach turned. They weren't just haunted.

They were **part of the same cycle**.

The **Masan didn't just kill**. It **fed** — on grief, silence, unfinished rites.

It took what people loved most.

---

The next words came slower:

"She was returned. You spoke her name. Fire received her. The balance requires a weight."

Arvind's voice came low. Shaken. "Take me."

The thing stopped.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The floor creaked.

“Willing blood is too easy.”

“A price is a price... only when it resists.”

That’s when Arvind understood.

The debt wasn’t about justice.

It was about pain.

About **loss**.

It wanted him to feel what his father felt. What every other victim’s family had felt. What grief carved into bone.

It didn’t want his body.

It wanted to take something **from** him.

---

The voice returned, quieter now.

“Choose.”

“Or I will.”

Arvind turned to Nandan — who was already shaking his head.

“No,” Nandan said, stepping forward. “Don’t even think it.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Arvind said. “But if I don’t choose, it will.”

The figure raised a hand.

Its fingers cracked open like branches splitting — not skin and bone, but blackened wood and burning thread.

One by one, the faces flickered again — and then paused on **Nandan’s**.

Arvind’s breath caught. “No—don’t—”

“He was the one who lit the pyre.”

“He knew what she had become.”

“He stayed. You left.”

Nandan stepped in front of Arvind.

His eyes locked on the thing. “Then take me.”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Arvind grabbed his arm. “Don’t do this.”

Nandan’s grip returned — strong, unshaking. “This is the only choice that belongs to me.”

---

The figure tilted its head.

Then it dissolved.

Ash exploded outward — like dry leaves caught in a storm — and in that moment, Nandan’s body arched back.

A cry left his lips — half pain, half peace.

He slumped.

Arvind caught him before he hit the ground.

Still breathing.

Eyes closed.

Not gone.

But changed.

---

Nandan would wake the next day with no memory of the night.

But his shadow... would move slower than his feet.

His breath... would sometimes fog the mirror, even when the room was warm.

And when he stood too close to fire — he flinched, even if he didn’t know why.

The debt had been taken.

But not fully paid.

And Arvind...

**knew Masan would return.**

## A Warning Ignored

### 6.1 A Warning Ignored: *The Quiet After*

Morning came, but it brought no warmth.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Thin light spilled across the hills, touching rooftops and treetops but refusing to cut the chill inside Arvind's bones. He hadn't slept. He sat near Nandan, who lay curled on the cot like a boy half his age, his breathing shallow but steady.

Nandan was alive. That should've brought relief.

But it didn't.

Something in the room had changed. Even after the figure vanished — even after the house fell silent — the weight remained. Not heavy like fear. Heavier, somehow. Like debt.

---

Arvind got up and made tea. His hands were still a little shaky.

He poured it slowly, but didn't take a sip.

The house was so quiet, even the sound of tea hitting the cup seemed too loud.

He stood there for a moment, staring at the steam curling from the surface.

Then — just for a second — he felt like someone was behind him.

A tall figure. Still. Watching.

He turned around, heart kicking once.

Nothing.

Just the same cold, heavy silence.

---

Nandan stirred around midday. Eyes slowly blinking open. Confused.

"Arvind?" he mumbled.

"I'm here."

Nandan sat up slowly, rubbing his arms. "Why's it so cold in here?"

Arvind didn't answer right away.

"You don't remember, do you?" he asked.

Nandan frowned. "What?"

"What happened last night."

Nandan shook his head. "I remember walking home. That's all."

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He looked at the window, then back at his brother. “Did something happen to you?”

Arvind managed a tight smile. “No. I’m okay.”

---

But he wasn’t. Not really.

That night changed something. In him. In Nandan. In the house.

And in the village.

---

Later that day, Arvind stepped out into the square. He needed answers. And only one man might still give them.

The sun was low, orange and bleeding. Villagers looked up as he passed — but said nothing. Their gazes lingered longer than usual. A few murmured beneath their breath. One woman made a protective gesture with her fingers and turned away.

Something had shifted.

Not just in Arvind’s house.

In *all* of Jharigaon.

And the villagers could feel it.

---

Arvind reached the far end of the square, where the path narrowed between two stone walls. At the end stood a wooden house with faded paint and a door left ajar — Mohan Lal’s.

He knocked once, then twice more.

A pause.

Then a voice.

“You ignored the warnings, didn’t you?”

Mohan Lal stepped into the doorway, eyes sharp, tired.

“You let her go. You called her name.”

Arvind didn’t deny it.

“You should come in,” Mohan Lal said. “There’s not much time before it circles back.”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

## 6.2 A Warning Ignored: *The Circle Doesn't Close*

Arvind stayed near the doorway. "I had to."

Mohan finally looked at him. His eyes were heavy — not with sleep, but with years of things no one else wanted to carry.

"She was your mother. I understand that," Mohan said. "But that night... that was more than just her."

Arvind nodded. "I saw them."

Mohan blinked once. "Who?"

"My father. The old principal. Others I didn't even recognize."

There was a pause. Only the faint clink of the kettle expanding in the heat.

"They were all part of it, weren't they?"

Mohan stood slowly and walked over to a low shelf. He pulled out a roll of faded cloth, wrapped around something stiff. "You want to know how deep this goes?"

He handed it to Arvind.

---

The cloth was old, the ink faded but still readable. Names. Dates. Notes scribbled in the margins.

*1972 — found by the well, ash under the fingernails.*

*1985 — missing after final bell, room locked from inside.*

*1991 — buried without priest, body stolen before dawn.*

Then:

*2005 — Joshi family, female.*

*Disappeared near the river. Name never spoken. Fire never lit.*

Arvind stared at the last line.

"That's my mother," he said, barely above a whisper.

Mohan nodded. "She wasn't the first. And she won't be the last."

---

Arvind sat down across from him, the scroll still open in his lap.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

“I thought I ended it,” he said. “The fire. The name. The ash.”

“You gave her peace,” Mohan said quietly. “But the Masan was never just her shadow. It’s older. Hungrier. It waits for pain. And when the village has no more to give, it finds a way to stir it back up.”

Outside, the wind picked up — rustling dry leaves against the window. It sounded like someone dragging their fingers across stone.

“What do I do now?” Arvind asked.

Mohan looked at him.

“You find where it began,” he said. “Before it circles back.”

## 6.3 A Warning Ignored: *The Smell of Ash*

The walk back from Mohan Lal’s house felt longer than usual. Not in distance — in weight. Arvind’s legs were heavy, and the late afternoon air clung to his skin like damp cloth.

He knew something now. Not everything, but enough to understand that what had haunted his family wasn’t just a past mistake. It was a pattern. A hunger. And he was standing in its mouth.

---

Nandan was waiting when he returned. He didn’t ask what Arvind had learned. He only watched him close the door and sit down on the floor instead of the chair.

For a long time, neither spoke.

Then Nandan whispered, “It’s following you now.”

---

That night, Arvind couldn’t sleep.

He sat in the main room with the lamp unlit, the house wrapped in shadow. Nandan had dozed off on the floor beside him — not fully asleep, just... disconnected. Like he was listening to something Arvind couldn’t hear.

The cracks on the walls were wider than before. The floor near the doorway was starting to bow inward, as if too many footsteps had passed through without opening the door.

The **smell of ash** was stronger. Dry. Charred. It burned at the inside of his nostrils — even though there was no fire. No smoke. Just that bitter scent that clung to memory, not matter.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

---

He stepped outside.

The village was silent, but not still. He saw curtains shift even when there was no wind. Windows that had been open were now shut. Lamps were blown out early.

People weren't just afraid.  
They were **expecting** something.

---

The next morning, Arvind walked to the school alone. Not because he wanted to — because he needed to see if it was still *his*.

The gate creaked open too easily. The lock was still on it — but it hadn't been latched.

He stepped into the corridor. Cold.

Inside the main classroom, nothing had moved. Desks still dusty. Chalk still lying broken on the floor. His chair still tilted, as if someone had left in a hurry.

But something **had** changed.

The office door was cracked open. And from inside... a whisper.

His name.

Faint. Slurred. Almost like a breath through burned lungs.

Arvind froze.

Then stepped inside.

---

The desk drawer was pulled open. A torn page from the old register lay inside.

In it, a name had been scrawled over and over again in faded black ink.

**Amrita.**

His mother's name.

Only — he hadn't written it.  
And no one in the village was supposed to know it.

The ink bled off the page like it had been soaked in water. Or tears.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

As he picked it up, a corner of the paper burned — right there in his hand — curling, darkening, until the whole sheet turned to ash in his palm.

No fire. No flame.  
Just **disappearance**.

---

He stepped out of the office — only to find Nandan standing in the corridor.

Eyes glazed. Breath shallow.

“You weren’t supposed to say her name,” he whispered.

Arvind stared at him. “I didn’t.”

Nandan blinked, like waking up from something.

“Then who did?”

## 6.4 A Warning Ignored: *What Never Left*

That night, Arvind didn’t sleep.

Not for lack of trying — he lay in bed with the blanket up to his chest, eyes closed, mind still. But sleep never came. Every time his breathing slowed, he would hear it.

A step.

A creak.

The shift of weight on the wooden floor just outside his door.

---

Nandan hadn’t spoken since the moment outside the school.

They’d walked home together in silence. He hadn’t eaten dinner. Hadn’t sat near the lamp. He’d just gone straight to his room and locked the door.

Now, Arvind could hear him through the thin wall.

Talking in his sleep.

Murmuring things. Broken phrases. Old names.

And sometimes, his own name — “**Bhaiya...**” — spoken like a child again. Like he’d fallen backward into some earlier version of himself.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

---

Sometime after midnight, Arvind sat up and lit the lantern.

The flame flickered violently for a second before settling into a quiet, low burn.

He stood.

The floor creaked.

But not under his feet.

He froze.

Somewhere on the other side of the house, something else moved. Not heavy, but not careful either. The sound of a body passing a wall. A shoulder grazing the frame. Not hiding — just existing, as if it had the right to be there.

He moved toward the main hall. Slowly.

The lantern stretched his shadow out in front of him, long and trembling. He hated how afraid he felt — not of death, but of recognition. Of seeing a face he already knew... on something that was no longer human.

---

The main room was empty.

But the front door was **unlocked**.

He was sure he had locked it. He always did.

He stepped forward and slowly opened it.

The cold outside hit his skin like a warning.

No wind. No sound.

Just the stillness of a village that knew better than to watch.

---

On the ground, near the steps, he saw something small.

A clump of ash.

Not scattered.

Piled — like it had been left. Or shed.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He looked up. Nothing in the yard. No movement near the gate. No footprints in the dust.

But when he stepped back inside and locked the door again, he caught sight of the floor just beyond the threshold.

And there — like before — were **footprints**.

Only this time, they led **in**.

But never led **out**.

---

He didn't wake Nandan.

What would he even say?

He poured a glass of water, sat by the window, and waited for morning.

But he knew, now, what he hadn't wanted to admit all along.

The thing they had feared never came back.

Because it had never left.

## 6.5 A Warning Ignored: *The Name Under the Floor*

By morning, the ash pile was gone.

Arvind didn't sweep it. Nandan didn't mention it. It simply wasn't there — like it had never existed. Like it had been borrowed and then reclaimed.

But something in the house had changed.

The walls felt heavier. Not just old. **Burdened**. The kind of weight that doesn't come from time — but from memory.

---

Later that day, Nandan sat by the fire, rubbing his forearms like they itched deep beneath the skin. Arvind brewed tea but didn't drink his.

Neither spoke much.

Until Nandan said, quietly:

“Did you ever wonder why this house is still standing?”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Arvind glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

Nandan nodded toward the floor. "This house is older than the village school. Older than half the roads. And somehow it's never cracked, never collapsed."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small brass key. "Baba kept this. Said never to use it. Said the trapdoor was sealed for a reason."

Arvind frowned. "Trapdoor?"

Nandan stood and moved the table aside.

Underneath, barely visible in the floorboards, was a faint seam — a square shape, aged and worn down, the grain of the wood warped slightly outward at the edges.

"I found it when I was sixteen," Nandan said. "Didn't open it. Didn't want to."

They stood over it together.

The key fit.

The wood creaked, and the small panel lifted with a long, brittle groan.

---

Inside was darkness. Not deep — just enough to be wrong.

A hollow space, maybe three feet deep.

Inside it:

- A small red cloth bundle, stained grey.
- A half-burned photo — curled at the edges, barely showing their father's face.
- And **a name**, carved into the wood below.

One name.

In old, slanted handwriting.

**Amrita.**

---

Nandan stepped back. "He kept it here..."

Arvind crouched. Touched the name lightly. The wood was rough — and warm.

They didn't speak.

There was no need.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

This house had not just been haunted —  
**It had been keeping a promise.**

---

That night, when Arvind finally lay down, he whispered the name under his breath once —  
not to summon, not to challenge.

Just to acknowledge.

**“Amrita.”**

And for the first time in weeks, the knocking didn't come.

But in the silence...  
he still didn't sleep.

Because **what's buried** in Jharigaon **never stays buried** for long.

## Marked for Death

### 7.1 Marked for Death: *The Quiet Before*

The knock never came.

But sleep never came either.

Arvind sat up in bed, staring at the edge of the open trapdoor. Nandan had laid a brass diya beside it, half-burned wick casting a soft orange glow. It was a small thing, but it helped — like it was keeping something just beneath the floor from rising.

He didn't close the trapdoor again.

They both agreed — after what they'd seen, what they'd read — they wouldn't seal it shut until they understood what their father had been hiding.

---

The air in the house had shifted.

It wasn't just cold. It was **watchful**.

Wood creaked even when no one walked. The shadows under tables stretched longer than they should. And once, while brushing his teeth, Arvind looked into the mirror and saw steam fog it behind him — though he hadn't boiled water, and the room was cold.

There was no reflection behind him.

Just the fog.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

---

Nandan barely spoke the next morning. He made tea, didn't drink it. Took out a comb, didn't use it. He sat on the veranda, facing the trees, eyes locked on the same spot for over an hour.

"I think Baba was waiting for her," he finally said, his voice rough.

Arvind looked up from where he was sweeping the corridor. "You mean Ma?"

Nandan nodded. "I think he thought she'd come back one day. Not... whole. But enough to say his name."

Arvind didn't know what to say to that.

He kept sweeping. The dust moved. The cold stayed.

---

By late morning, a few villagers passed the gate. None greeted them. One old woman made the sign against evil as she walked past — not toward the house, but toward **Arvind**.

That was new.

---

He went to the back room to pull out his notebook, but paused at the window. There was something in the sky — a light grey haze drifting low, hugging rooftops. Not smoke. Not mist.

Ash.

So fine you wouldn't notice it unless you were looking for it.

---

Nandan came inside. He stood at the window for a long time before saying, "Do you feel like you've been... claimed?"

Arvind didn't answer at first. "I feel like I'm being prepared."

Nandan nodded slowly. "Same thing."

---

A little before noon, someone knocked.

A real knock. Soft. Uneven. Human.

Mohan Lal stood at the door, older than usual, face pinched.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

“I won’t take much time,” he said, voice low. “But I had to come.”

Arvind invited him in. He didn’t sit.

Mohan’s eyes scanned the room quickly, pausing for a second at the open trapdoor. He didn’t ask.

“There are two things,” he said. “And both are bad.”

Arvind stood by the window. “What happened?”

---

Mohan looked at Nandan, then back at Arvind. “That little girl — the one who saw something near the temple? She hasn’t spoken since yesterday. Won’t eat. Won’t sleep. Her mother says she just stares at the fire and hums.”

“Hums what?” Nandan asked.

“Something none of us know. No words. Just a tune. Over and over.”

Arvind’s jaw tightened. “She said she saw someone crying.”

Mohan nodded. “And now she cries in her sleep. But not for herself.”

---

Arvind turned slightly. “And the second?”

Mohan took out a small slip of paper, burned at the edges. “Someone signed into the school yesterday.”

Arvind frowned. “That’s impossible. I haven’t—”

“It wasn’t your name.”

He handed it to Arvind.

In soft, rounded script, written in black ink:

**Amrita Joshi**

Date: The previous day.

Arvind stared at it. “Where did this come from?”

“Old register. Principal’s office. Wasn’t there last week. Wasn’t there yesterday morning.”

Nandan stepped closer. “No one’s gone in since then?”

Mohan shook his head. “Not unless ghosts have keys now.”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He looked around one last time before leaving. “Be careful. You’ve started something.”

---

When the door closed, Arvind stood with the paper still in his hand.

Nandan stepped closer. “You think she’s... really here?”

Arvind’s eyes didn’t move from the name.

“I think she’s been here longer than we knew.”

## 7.2 Marked for Death: *Whispers from the Ledger*

The paper sat on the desk like it was still warm. Arvind hadn’t moved it since Mohan Lal left. Just looking at it made his chest tighten — not from fear, but recognition.

Her handwriting.

He didn’t remember it, but something in the loops of the letters, the gentle tilt of the J in *Joshi*, felt familiar.

**Too familiar.**

“Why would her name be in the school logbook?” Nandan asked from behind.

Arvind shook his head. “She wasn’t a teacher.”

“Not officially,” Nandan said, eyes narrowing. “But she used to visit the school sometimes. Remember? Before she... disappeared.”

Arvind did remember.

Faintly.

A smile at the gate. Her voice echoing in the courtyard. Chalk dust on her sari.

A memory that had slipped through the cracks until now.

---

By late afternoon, Arvind couldn’t take it anymore.

He grabbed his coat.

Nandan stood. “Where are you going?”

Arvind looked him dead in the eyes. “Back.”

“To the school?”

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Arvind nodded. "If she signed her name... something of her is still there."

---

The walk up to the school felt longer than it had before.

The air was thick, still, and dry. Even the birds had stopped. The silence of the village felt like it had followed him up the slope — like eyes had crawled out of windows to watch him walk alone.

The key turned too easily.

Inside, the building hadn't changed.

And yet, everything had.

---

He stepped into the principal's office.

The desk was exactly as he'd left it — only now, the drawer he never touched was slightly ajar.

He knelt and opened it fully.

Inside was the old attendance ledger — dusty, its cover fraying at the corners. The first few pages were normal. Names. Roll numbers. Notes in the margins from years ago.

Then he reached the last few pages.

They had no dates.

Only **names**.

No handwriting matched the others.

Some looked rushed. Others careful. One was written backward.

And at the very bottom of the last page:

**Amrita Joshi** — again.

The ink looked wet.

---

As he stared at it, he heard the door behind him creak.

He turned fast — nothing.

But something shifted in the air.

The smell of ash.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

It drifted from the corridor.

He stood, walked slowly toward it.

And froze.

---

The blackboard in the classroom had writing on it now.

He hadn't written it.

He hadn't even touched chalk.

In small, childlike strokes:

**"Fire never forgets.  
And neither do the ones left in it."**

---

Arvind took a shaky breath.

Then heard the faintest sound.

From the far corner of the room.

A cry.

Soft. Wet. Gasping.

He turned — and in the light slanting through the cracked shutters, he saw it:

A small set of **footprints** burned into the wooden floor.

Just like before.

Only this time, they were **leading toward him.**

---

He backed out slowly, heart pounding, the register still in hand.

When he stepped outside, the sunlight had dimmed.

And in the dust outside the school gate, something had been written by an unseen hand:

**"You opened the door.  
Now you will learn what it means to watch."**

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

## 7.3 Marked for Death: *Crossing the Threshold*

Arvind didn't remember the walk back.

He left the school in a fog. The sky above the hill had turned dull bronze, the kind of light that doesn't feel like day or night. Every step felt heavier, like the ground knew he carried something it didn't want to touch.

When he finally reached the house, Nandan was already outside, pacing.

"You were gone too long," he said, tension sharp in his voice.

Arvind didn't answer. He handed him the register.

Nandan flipped through it quickly, then stopped. "She signed it again."

Arvind nodded. "Twice. Once in the official page. Once at the back. Same name. Same hand."

Nandan looked at the ink, his brow furrowing. "It's not dry."

"I know."

---

They sat in silence for a long time.

Finally, Arvind spoke. "Do you remember when they told us she was gone?"

Nandan looked down. "Only the silence. Only Baba, standing at the window. He didn't cry."

"He didn't speak either," Arvind said.

"No. He just... closed the door. Like if he didn't say it, it wouldn't be real."

Arvind's voice turned bitter. "He never let us ask."

---

The register sat between them.

Arvind flipped it open again and stared at the second signature.

It was neat. Careful. Measured.

Not a ghost's scrawl. Not some faded memory.

A presence.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

A decision.

“She wasn’t supposed to be remembered,” Arvind said, more to himself. “They made sure of it.”

Nandan glanced at him. “Who?”

“The village. Baba. Everyone. They turned her into a story. Not a name. Not a person. Just... something that used to exist.”

---

Nandan looked at the window. “I think he tried to protect us.”

Arvind turned toward him. “By burying her twice?”

---

Night fell slowly.

Neither of them lit a lamp.

They sat in the dark, the register still open between them.

Outside, the trees creaked — not from wind, but from age. And grief.

---

Around midnight, a gust of wind blew through the cracks in the window.

It carried with it a smell they knew too well now — ash, and something older.

Nandan stood. “I’ll get the matches.”

Arvind didn’t move. He was staring at the floor — just in front of the trapdoor.

The name was back.

**Amrita.**

Drawn in a fine line of soot.

And beneath it, something new:

**“She remembers you.**

**She remembers everything.”**

**7.4 Marked for Death: *Before the Fire***

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

That night, the house barely breathed.

Even the rats behind the walls had gone still — as if they too were holding their breath.

The open register sat between the brothers, Amrita's name circled twice in the dim lantern glow. Once in the official log, and again on a blank page in the back — still wet when Arvind found it.

They hadn't spoken much since.

Not because they didn't want to.

Because they didn't know what to say.

---

Nandan broke the silence first.

"There used to be a trunk down there," he said, his voice low. "Do you remember?"

Arvind looked at him slowly. "Down where?"

"Under the house. After Ma... disappeared. I was a kid, but I remember Baba carrying it. Wrapped in a blanket. He put it down there, and locked the trapdoor for good."

Arvind stared at the floorboards beneath them.

"I thought I made that up."

---

Later, Arvind stepped into his room.

His breath caught.

On the wooden floor, drawn in fine grey soot, was a single word:

**Amrita.**

He didn't wipe it away.

Didn't dare.

---

The next morning, just after sunrise, they opened the trapdoor again.

No words were exchanged. Just movement.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Step by step, they climbed down into the space beneath the floor. The air was heavier — not musty, not stale. Just thick. Like it didn't want to be disturbed.

In the far corner: a trunk.

Wooden. Dust-covered. But not forgotten.

---

Nandan knelt beside it. Ran his hand across the top.

"Same one," he said.

The rope was tightly wrapped. Newer than the trunk. Almost pristine.

Arvind crouched beside him. "Why would he seal it, but not destroy it?"

"Because he couldn't," Nandan said. "Not everything."

Arvind untied the knot. His hands moved carefully, almost like he was afraid it might vanish if he rushed.

He opened the lid.

---

Inside:

A folded cotton sari, faded but clean

A single iron comb

A rusted payal

And a torn photograph — a woman's hand resting gently on a boy's head. The face had been ripped away.

At the very bottom, beneath a layer of cloth, was an envelope.

Old. Yellowed. But sealed.

Arvind opened it carefully.

---

*To whoever finds this,*

*If you've come this far, then you know her name. You know what the village chose to forget.*

*She did not drown. She went to the ghat alone. To speak to the thing that watches from the ashes.*

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

*I couldn't stop her. I didn't understand until it was too late. I heard her voice in the wind. In the fire. And when she vanished, I knew what would follow.*

*There were no rites. No priest. No name spoken. Just silence.*

*I buried what I could in the hollow near the neem tree. Not to hide her. But to keep her from becoming... what they feared.*

*If she returns — speak her name. Speak it true.*

– B. Joshi

---

The air in the room shifted. The silence pressed in.

Arvind whispered, “He tried to protect her.”

Nandan’s voice was tight. “But silence isn’t protection. It’s a cage.”

They looked at each other — two sons who had never been told the whole story.

Arvind folded the letter again. “We go to the neem tree.”

---

Outside, the wind picked up, carrying a chill that felt deeper than winter.

Not weather.

Warning.

The kind of cold that comes when something old begins to wake.

## **7.5 Marked for Death: *Beneath the Neem Tree***

The neem tree stood at the northern edge of the village, where the forest thinned but never truly ended. It wasn’t marked. No stone. No garland. Just a lonely tree that seemed too still for the breeze that moved around it.

They reached just before dusk.

The light had started to thin — not sunset, but that strange hour when color drains from everything and shadows begin to sharpen.

Nandan had brought a spade. Arvind carried the letter.

Neither spoke.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

---

They began to dig at the base of the tree.

The soil was soft at first, then turned dark and thick. Damp even though it hadn't rained.

About half a foot down, the spade struck something.

Wood.

Not a box. A bundle.

Arvind reached down with both hands and lifted it carefully.

Wrapped in red cloth.

Tied with the same knot Baba used on everything.

It was cold to the touch.

---

He unwrapped it slowly.

Inside: ash.

And bone. Tiny, delicate.

At the bottom, something else — a sliver of charred fabric. The same sari pattern from the trunk.

Nandan stepped back. His breath caught. "It's really her."

Arvind nodded, but his eyes were fixed on the ash.

"It never received fire," he said quietly. "Not properly. No rites. No peace."

He opened the letter. Read it again.

Then folded his hands, and said her name aloud:

**"Amrita Joshi."**

---

The ground seemed to still.

The leaves around the tree rustled, but not from wind.

The air felt thicker — pressed down.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

And then they heard it.

A breath.

Not theirs.

It came from the base of the tree. Low. Long.

Like something inhaling for the first time in years.

The earth trembled.

---

Nandan stepped back. "We should go."

But Arvind stayed. Kneeling. Eyes closed.

"She was our mother," he said. "Not a curse. Not a secret."

He placed the bundle gently back into the earth.

And for a moment — just a breath — the air grew warm.

Not cold. Not hostile.

But the moment passed.

---

The shadow moved behind the tree.

They both saw it.

Not a full form. Not yet.

Just a shape. Watching.

Nandan grabbed Arvind's shoulder. "It's not done."

Arvind whispered, "It's never been."

They turned and left, neither looking back.

---

That night, as they reached home, they found the front door slightly ajar.

Inside, everything was untouched... except for one thing.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The old photograph from the trunk — the one with their mother's face torn — now sat on the table.

The tear was gone.

Her face had returned.

She was looking at them.

And smiling.

## The Last Night

### 8.1 The Last Night: *Shadows Don't Sleep*

The smile in the photo stayed with Arvind long after the lamp had been turned out.

Not because it was warm.

Because it hadn't been there before.

That photo had no face — not for twenty years. And now, her smile had returned. Soft. Knowing. A little too calm for everything that had happened.

Arvind sat at the edge of his bed, staring at it. The fire from the lantern flickered in her eyes.

She wasn't haunting him.

She was watching.

---

Nandan hadn't spoken since they returned. He sat outside, hood pulled tight, staring into the tree line where the mist had begun to settle again.

Arvind walked out with two cups of tea. He offered one. Nandan didn't take it.

"She came back," Nandan said.

Arvind didn't ask who.

They both knew.

---

The village had gone still again.

Doors bolted. Windows covered.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

No bell rang from the temple. Even the dogs — usually the last to fear anything — had vanished.

Only the wind moved. It carried the smell of ash now, even during the day.

Like the whole village was preparing for something they couldn't stop.

---

Arvind walked to the edge of the school grounds just before dusk.

The gate was unlatched. Hanging loose. He hadn't been back since the day he found her name in the register.

Inside, dust floated in thick beams of light, like the building was filling with smoke no one could see.

Something in him told him to go upstairs.

He did.

And in the principal's office — his office — the photograph of the school's staff had changed.

The last row, far right corner: a new face.

His mother.

Smiling.

The ink fresh.

Her name signed under it in clean, dark letters.

**Amrita Joshi.**

---

He didn't touch it. Didn't speak. Just backed out of the room.

And as he left the school, the wind blew harder. It wasn't cold.

It was hot.

---

That night, the sky over Jharigaon turned a color no one could name.

Not black.

Not grey.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Just... wrong.

Smoke curled from chimneys, though no one had lit a fire.

The trees near the burning ghat bent inwards — like bowing toward something walking through them.

And under the neem tree...

The ground cracked.

Something shifted beneath the soil.

Something that had waited long enough.

## 8.2 The Last Night: *The One That Walks*

The sound came just after midnight.

Not a knock.

Not a cry.

A scrape.

Long. Slow. Like something being dragged across stone.

Arvind sat up in bed instantly.

He looked toward the window — but it was shut. Locked. Curtains drawn.

The sound came again. From below.

From inside the house.

---

He stepped out into the hallway. No lamp. No voice. Just the creaking of the old wooden floor under his feet.

Nandan's door was open.

Empty.

The cot was still warm.

---

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Then he saw the ash.

A single trail of it — faint, like someone had dragged burnt cloth along the floor. It led toward the back room. The one they never used. The one even their father had kept locked.

It was open now.

---

He pushed the door slowly.

The room was dark. But not empty.

Nandan stood facing the wall, his back rigid.

“Bhai...” Arvind whispered.

No answer.

“Nandan?”

Still nothing.

And then — in the dim corner of the room — something moved behind Nandan.

Something tall.

Its body flickered, not in light, but in shape — as if it hadn't fully decided what form to take.

A woman's face. A man's mouth. A child's hands. All shifting, second by second.

It stepped forward.

Arvind grabbed his brother's shoulder.

Nandan finally spoke. But it wasn't his voice.

Not fully.

“She's here.”

---

The figure raised one hand — a bony, soot-covered limb that ended in long, blackened fingers.

It didn't strike.

It pointed.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

To the ground.

To the floor beneath their feet.

And then it vanished — like smoke inhaled too quickly.

---

Nandan collapsed. Arvind caught him, dragging him into the hallway.

His brother's body was ice cold, but breathing.

And beneath the floorboards, they heard it:

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Three sounds. Not on the door.

From underneath the house.

From the old crawlspace.

From where they'd buried what was left.

---

Arvind's voice shook. "It's not done."

Nandan stirred, murmuring through shallow breaths, "She was returned. But it never wanted just her..."

Arvind whispered, "It wants the house."

Nandan shook his head.

"No. It wants what was built on her silence."

---

Outside, the sky cracked — no thunder, just a sound like the earth splitting apart.

The village dogs finally howled.

And for the first time in weeks...

the temple bell rang on its own.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

## 8.3 The Last Night: *The Debt Comes Due*

The knocking didn't stop.

It grew louder.

Not frantic. Not fast. Just steady — like a heartbeat from below.

**Knock.**

**Knock.**

**Knock.**

Each sound made the air feel heavier, like the pressure in the room was being pulled downward into the floor.

Nandan leaned against the wall, barely upright. "It's calling. Same as it did for her."

Arvind didn't answer.

He walked to the window and opened it. The sky outside was a dark reddish hue, not from clouds, but from smoke.

The neem tree, far off in the distance, had caught fire.

Except there was no flame.

Only **glow** — pulsing at its base, as if something beneath the roots was alive and angry.

---

Downstairs, the floor groaned.

Not from footsteps.

From weight.

Something had entered.

Something that didn't knock anymore.

---

They moved together, slowly, down the stairs.

At the base, the front door was open.

Wind moved through the house.

But it didn't bring cold.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

It brought **scent** — of burnt fabric, dried earth, and something older than death.

They stepped into the living room.

And saw the photo on the table again.

Now it was burning.

No flame.

Just smoke curling off the edges of the picture.

But the image didn't blacken.

It stayed.

Burned — and **preserved** — at the same time.

---

Then a whisper:

**“Say it again.”**

The voice was neither male nor female. Not one, but many. Layered. Like a crowd speaking through the same mouth.

Arvind looked around. “Say what?”

The shadows in the corners twitched.

And the whisper again:

**“The name. The promise. Say it loud.”**

Nandan whispered, “That's not her voice.”

“I know.”

“Then don't give it what it wants.”

---

But Arvind stepped forward.

He looked at the place where the ashes had once been left. Where her name had appeared in soot. Where her silence had turned into something hungry.

And he said it again.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

“Amrita Joshi.”

---

The lights in the house died.

All of them.

The whisper turned into a scream — but only inside their heads. A pressure that made Arvind fall to his knees. Nandan groaned, covering his ears.

And then—

**Silence.**

---

The figure stepped out from the hallway.

It didn't rush.

It didn't threaten.

It just **was** — tall, thin, faceless except for fragments.

One moment, it wore their mother's eyes.

The next, their father's sorrow.

Then the principal's stern mouth. Then a child's smile.

Then nothing.

The Masan had come home.

## 8.4 The Last Night: *The Final Offering*

The figure didn't speak.

It didn't have to.

Its form shifted — not like smoke, but like memory unraveling.

First their mother, Amrita, face calm but hollow.

Then their father — eyes sunken, mouth silent, as he'd always been after she vanished.

Then someone Arvind didn't recognize — a face twisted by fire, wide eyes pleading.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The Masan flickered between them like it was trying to **be** them all.

Trying to **remember** what it once was.

Or who had fed it.

---

Arvind stood his ground. His voice wavered. "You came for her."

The figure didn't answer — just turned slightly. The sound of **ash underfoot** followed its every movement.

Nandan stepped forward, fists clenched. "You've taken enough."

Still no response.

But now the air changed.

Heavier.

As if it were waiting for something.

---

Then a breath — **Arvind's own** — escaped his lungs without permission.

It was pulled from him. Like the thing was sampling it.

A test.

And then, it **spoke**.

"A name was given. A fire was lit. The balance... broken."

Its voice came from the walls. The floor. Inside their skulls.

"Now... a weight must be placed."

Arvind felt it then — a pressure in his chest, like something gripping his ribs from the inside.

---

Nandan looked at him. "Don't."

Arvind's mouth was already open to say it — "*Take me.*"

But the Masan **laughed**.

Not cruel.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Not joyful.

Just tired.

“The willing are light. Too easy. The debt is pain.”

Its arm raised, slow and stiff like it hadn't moved in years. The fingers opened — bone stretched tight with black thread and charred sinew.

In its palm: a **face**.

Nandan's.

---

Arvind lunged forward, “No!”

But the figure didn't touch him.

It touched **the ground** — and the floor beneath them cracked.

Memories spilled out.

His mother kneeling at the ghat. Whispering something into the ash.

His father, watching from the distance, holding a matchstick and crying.

The principal's final day — locking his office door and never leaving.

The boy who screamed by the trees. The girl burned near the shrine.

---

This wasn't about his family.

It was about **all of them**.

And Nandan understood.

He whispered, “It never wanted her.”

Arvind shook his head. “What?”

“It wanted silence. It feeds on those who say nothing. Who bury the truth and live on.”

Nandan stepped forward.

“I won't be silent.”

---

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The Masan turned its hand.

A spark of flame licked up its arm — but it didn't burn.

It **revealed**.

Behind it, the neem tree split — the center of the curse — its trunk blackened with faces.

Arvind's voice cracked. "Don't do this."

But Nandan didn't stop.

"I'll end it."

He reached out —

And **touched the flame** in the Masan's hand.

---

The scream that followed wasn't from the entity.

It was from the house. The walls cracked. The glass shattered.

A rush of wind **sucked the figure backward** — not destroyed, not defeated...

**bound.**

Back into the tree.

Back into the ash.

Back into the silence.

---

Nandan fell to the floor.

Alive.

But changed.

## 8.5 The Last Night: *The Ash That Remains*

The wind stopped.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Not slowed.  
Not died down.  
**Stopped.**

Everything — the broken glass, the cracked walls, the open door — went still.

Even the smoke that had clung to the ceiling froze in midair for a moment... before drifting downward like dust.

The neem tree, miles away, stopped glowing.

The burning smell was gone.

Only the ash remained.

---

Arvind sat on the floor, holding Nandan's head in his lap.

His brother was breathing — shallow, steady.

But his face was pale, eyes fluttering beneath closed lids. Like he was **dreaming something too big for his body to hold.**

Outside, the village stayed silent.

No one had come.

No one would.

They had always known how this ended.

It was just finally **someone else's turn** to carry it.

---

The next morning, Arvind didn't sleep.

He cleaned what he could. Swept the glass. Closed the door. Put the broken photo away.

But he didn't throw it out.

He wrapped it in cloth and placed it in a drawer, alongside his mother's old comb and the register page from the school — the one that still had her name.

---

Nandan woke around noon.

He didn't remember what happened.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He remembered the tree.

He remembered fire.

But everything else was fog.

When Arvind tried to explain, he just said, "I believe you. But I don't want to know more."

He flinched at sudden sounds now.

Avoided mirrors.

His shadow lingered half a second too long after he walked away.

---

Later that evening, Arvind walked to the ghat alone.

The ground there still bore the marks — a ring of scorched soil, blackened roots.

He stood in the center, closed his eyes, and whispered:

**"She was never yours."**

Then he scattered the last of the ash into the river.

Not as an offering.

As a warning.

---

From behind him, a breeze stirred the trees.

Not angry.

Not warm.

Just watching.

And in it — the faintest breath of sound.

Not a voice.

Not a threat.

Just one last word.

A whisper only Arvind could hear:

"For now."

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

## 9.1 Escape or Doom: *The Hollow Morning*

Morning didn't come easily.

It wasn't just the aftermath of the night before — it was something in the light itself.

Faint. Washed out. Like the sun was too tired to shine properly over Jharigaon anymore.

Arvind sat outside on the veranda, the air around him still laced with a smell that didn't belong. Not smoke. Not death. Just... something burnt into the wind.

Inside, Nandan slept. He hadn't said a word since waking again.

Not about the fire.

Not about the name.

Not about the thing that had come and gone.

---

Arvind's hands were wrapped around a cup of tea that had gone cold.

He hadn't touched it.

His thoughts kept drifting to the same thing:

**"What now?"**

Because the Masan hadn't been destroyed.

It had been **satisfied**.

For now.

But not gone.

The debt had shifted.

And Arvind had no illusions about what that meant — not for him, not for his brother, and not for the village that still refused to speak of it.

---

He looked across the square.

Doors were open again.

Smoke rose from a few rooftops — the normal kind. Cooking fires. Morning routines.

**Pretending.**

Like nothing had happened.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Like they hadn't all heard the temple bell ring on its own.

Like they hadn't heard screams in the night.

Like they weren't all hoping someone else would keep the balance next time.

---

Mohan Lal passed by on the path. He didn't stop.

Just offered Arvind a glance — a small nod — and kept walking.

No words.

But that nod carried more weight than any blessing.

It said:

**You lived.**

**We saw.**

**We won't talk about it.**

---

Later that day, Arvind walked to the school.

Not because he was ready to teach.

Because he had to see.

The main gate was shut. A single sheet of paper pinned to it.

**CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.**

No signature.

No reason.

Just final.

He turned the knob anyway.

The door didn't budge.

---

When he returned home, Nandan was waiting on the porch, holding something wrapped in cloth.

"What's that?" Arvind asked.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Nandan handed it to him silently.

He unwrapped it slowly — recognizing the bundle from the first time he'd received one.

Only this time, inside was **a key**.

Old. Rusted.

Familiar.

It belonged to their father's old trunk. The one that had been **empty** last time they opened it.

---

"It wasn't empty," Nandan finally said.

"I just wasn't ready to remember."

## 9.2 Escape or Doom: *The Key to Leaving*

Arvind turned the key over in his palm.

Old iron. Rough-edged. Still carrying a faint smell of oil and wood. He hadn't seen it in years — not since before their father's funeral.

"You said the trunk was empty," he said, not accusing, just... trying to understand.

Nandan didn't meet his eyes. "I lied."

"Why?"

"I was scared of what was inside. And what I'd remember if I opened it."

---

They brought the key to the storage room behind the kitchen — the place their father used to call "*the room no one enters unless something is truly broken.*"

It had always been locked.

The trunk sat in the far corner, its lid warped by time, but intact. Dust coated everything, but the air here... didn't smell like old things.

It smelled like smoke.

Even after all these years.

---

Arvind inserted the key and turned.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The latch clicked.

Inside, folded neatly, were papers — dozens of them. Some were old letters. Some were government notices. Some, handwritten entries in a language Arvind didn't recognize.

But one was newer than the rest.

A letter.

In their father's handwriting.

---

“To the one who opens this,  
I failed to speak. And because of that, we lost her.  
But silence does not mean I didn't know.  
The Masan marked this family long before either of you were born.  
The land beneath the school...  
It was never meant to be touched.  
They said it had gone cold.  
But they were wrong.  
We built over what should've remained ash.  
And the first child to disappear — that was the sign.  
The village covered it up. The teachers left. One by one.  
Then they called me to perform the rites for someone I didn't know.  
A body left burning too close to the water.  
And I knew.  
The balance had shifted again.  
If you are reading this, do not stay.  
Leave Jharigaon.  
Before the Masan forgets it was fed.”

---

Arvind read it twice.

Then looked at Nandan. “You still want to stay?”

His brother looked tired. Not afraid — just worn down to something hollow.

“I don't know what I want,” Nandan said. “But I know this place doesn't let go easily.”

---

That night, Arvind packed a small bag.

Just the essentials. No documents. No photos. Just clothes and cash.

He told Nandan he was going to the bus station.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

His brother didn't stop him.

Just asked, "Do you think it'll follow?"

Arvind didn't have an answer.

So he just said, "If it does, at least I won't be here when it knocks."

---

But as he stepped out into the dark road, the wind shifted.

Soft. Warm.

**Familiar.**

A whisper passed through the trees.

Not a threat.

Not a farewell.

Just a reminder.

"No one leaves without paying."

## 9.3 Escape or Doom: *The Road Out*

The morning mist hadn't lifted.

Not completely.

The road out of Jharigaon — the same winding stretch that brought Arvind back weeks ago — now felt longer. Narrower. Trees leaned inward like old watchers, their branches twisted toward the sky like accusing fingers.

He hadn't told anyone at the bus stand who he was.

Didn't use his full name.

Didn't ask questions.

He just waited.

One bag. One ticket.

Just enough rupees for a one-way ride to Haldwani.

---

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

When the bus arrived, it groaned the same way it had that first day. The same cracked blue paint. The same driver, maybe. Hard to tell.

Arvind climbed aboard and took a seat near the middle.

He didn't look back at the village.

He told himself not to.

But just before the bus pulled away — he turned.

And saw **someone** standing at the turn in the road.

Not Nandan.

Not a villager.

A **woman**.

Pale. Still. Barefoot.

And **smiling**.

---

He blinked.

She was gone.

---

The ride was quiet.

Too quiet.

Even the hum of the engine felt... hollow.

No music. No small talk. Just the road and the trees and the hum that shouldn't have been so loud.

The driver didn't say a word.

Not once.

Arvind stared out the window, watching the forest slip past.

But after twenty minutes, he realized something.

**They were still in the forest.**

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Same bend. Same slope. Same fallen tree near the rocks.

He checked his watch.

No signal. No time shift. Just a slow, creeping sense that the road was **looping**.

---

He stood and walked to the driver. "Are we... taking a detour?"

The man didn't answer.

Arvind leaned closer. "Sir?"

The driver turned slightly.

His face was wrong.

His eyes were **empty**.

Not blind.

Not blank.

Just **void**.

Like someone had hollowed out the inside and left only a face behind.

Arvind stumbled back.

The road outside changed again.

Back to the same stretch.

Over.

And over.

And over.

---

A voice — not from the driver, not from the speakers — came from behind him.

One of the passengers. Or all of them.

Soft. Calm.

**"You already left once."**

He turned around.

The bus seats were full now.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Faces he remembered.

His mother.

The principal.

The boy from the forest.

The girl near the shrine.

Every one of them staring forward, eyes closed, lips unmoving.

**“You came back.”**

---

Arvind pounded the side of the bus.

“STOP!”

The world outside didn't change.

The driver didn't blink.

The voices whispered again.

**“She waited. You left.”**

The road finally ended — not in another village.

But back at the foot of the hill.

Jharigaon.

The bus doors opened on their own.

---

Arvind stepped off.

The sun was just where it had been when he left.

Nothing had passed.

Time... had stayed.

But the village was watching now.

Open windows.

Curious eyes.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

A place that never fully let you go.

---

And at the top of the road, Nandan stood waiting.

Holding something in his hands.

A bundle of fresh cloth.

Ash inside.

Still warm.

## 9.4 Escape or Doom: *The Mark That Remains*

He didn't speak when he reached Nandan.

Couldn't.

Nandan handed him the bundle without a word. His hands were steady. His face was unreadable — not angry, not surprised. Just... resigned.

Arvind untied the cloth.

Inside: ash.

Not the kind left by cooking fires. Not even from a pyre.

This ash was **fine**, pale-gray — nearly white.

The kind that clung to **skin**.

It wasn't warm this time.

But it hadn't cooled all the way either.

---

Nandan broke the silence. "How far did you get?"

"Far enough," Arvind said.

"You saw it, didn't you?"

He didn't answer.

Instead, he asked, "Did you leave this on the step?"

Nandan shook his head slowly. "It was there when I woke up. Same way the first one came."

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

---

They went inside.

The air in the house had changed again. Not cold. But **thick** — like the walls had been breathing on their own in his absence.

Arvind set the ash bundle down near the hearth. It didn't spread.

Didn't move.

It just... **waited**.

---

They sat opposite each other for hours.

The tea cooled untouched.

The walls seemed to inch closer.

Sometimes Arvind would glance at the shuttered windows — quick, sharp looks — as if checking for something.

Sometimes he would start to speak... and then stop.

Nandan said nothing.

But he watched.

He saw something building in his brother — a tightness, a resolve that hadn't been there the day before.

Not rage.

Not despair.

Something colder.

More dangerous.

---

In the late afternoon, Arvind stood and slipped out the door without a word.

Nandan didn't stop him.

Didn't even ask where he was going.

Because by now they both knew: there was nowhere left to run.

---

The streets were empty.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Shutters bolted. Doors barred.  
Even the stray dogs had vanished.

The mist swallowed everything beyond a few meters — houses became ghosts, trees became crooked hands clawing the sky.

Arvind walked.  
Past the square.  
Past the crumbling schoolhouse.  
Toward the far edge of the village where the land dipped toward the old river.

He didn't know why he was going there.  
He didn't feel fear anymore.  
Only a kind of strange calm.

The river was low this time of year. Its banks muddy, the stones slick.

He stood there for a long time, staring at the slow water twisting through the rocks.  
At the ghat far downstream, where smoke no longer rose.  
At the peepal trees bending in the unseen wind.

The world felt thin here.  
As if one more breath would tear a hole in it.

---

Eventually, he turned back.

The walk home felt longer. He barely noticed his own feet.  
Fog curled around him like fingers, but it didn't touch him.  
Not really.

When he reached the house, the door was still ajar.

Nandan sat by the fire, poking the embers with a stick.  
He didn't look up.

Arvind closed the door quietly behind him.  
Sat down opposite.

Neither spoke.  
There was nothing left to say.

---

Later that night, Arvind peeled off his shirt before bed — and stopped.

On his shoulder, near the collarbone — a faint mark.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Not a bruise.

Not a scratch.

But an outline.

A hand.

Not burned in.

Not carved.

Just there — like it had always been.

He rubbed at it, but it didn't fade.

It wasn't painful.

But it was **warm**.

---

Nandan stood at the doorway, watching him.

“Looks like it followed you back.”

“I didn't invite it.”

“You didn't have to.”

---

The next morning, Arvind went to the school.

Just to see.

The gate was open this time.

No signs. No warnings.

But the building looked worse than before. Not from decay — but from something else.

**Like it had aged overnight.**

Inside, the walls were cracked deeper.

The air had a weight to it — not of dust, but memory.

Footsteps echoed when he moved, even when he walked softly.

When he stepped into his office, he froze.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

On the desk, where no one should have been:

A note.

In charcoal.

No envelope. No name.

Just four words, in looping script:

“We never let go.”

---

He stared at the note for a long time.

Then folded it.

Put it in his pocket.

And turned off the light.

## 9.5 Escape or Doom: *The Door That Waits*

The school didn't feel abandoned.

It felt **expectant**.

As if the walls had been waiting, the floorboards holding their breath, the dust lying still out of respect for whatever was about to happen.

Arvind walked the halls slowly. He didn't call out. Didn't touch anything.

But he knew where he was going.

---

In the main building's east wing — the old wing — there was a door.

It had never opened, not even when he was a child.

Every teacher avoided it. Every student whispered about it.

**The prayer room**, they used to call it.

But no one had prayed there in decades.

The frame was warped with age. The doorknob rusted. The paint cracked and peeling.

And yet...

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The dust in front of the threshold had been disturbed.

Recently.

---

He placed his palm on the door.

Cold.

Not from weather.

From **absence**.

The kind of cold that came from a place the world had stopped recognizing.

He turned the handle.

It gave way easily.

As if the door had been **waiting for his hand**.

---

Inside was darkness.

Not black.

Just **old**.

The air carried a strange scent — not decay, not rot. Something **sour**, something **unfinished**.

His father had spoken of this room once. Only once.

“Some rooms are sealed for good reason.  
Not to protect what’s inside.  
But to protect you from it.”

---

He stepped in.

The floor didn’t creak.

The air was heavier here.

At the center of the room sat a single wooden chair.

And on it, something wrapped in layers of cloth.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He knew that shape.

Another bundle.

Like the first one.

Like the one Nandan found.

But this one was **older**. More brittle. Covered in soot that hadn't been disturbed in years.

He didn't touch it.

Not yet.

Instead, he looked up.

The ceiling bore **marks** — symbols carved in charcoal, long faded.

Names.

He couldn't read all of them, but one stood out.

**Amrita**

And beneath it —

**Arvind**

**Nandan**

His breath caught.

Someone had written them **before**.

Before the school reopened. Before they ever came back.

Before they even understood what the Masan truly was.

---

He turned to leave.

But the door was already closed.

Not locked.

Just... gone.

The wall behind him was seamless.

No knob.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

No way out.

---

A whisper rose behind him.

Not a voice.

Just breath, curling through the air like smoke.

**“You came back.”**

## 10.1 The Price of Arrogance: *The Last Room*

At first, Arvind didn't panic.

He pressed his hands against the wall where the door had been. He whispered Nandan's name. He called out louder. He kicked — once, twice — but the sound barely echoed.

It was as if the room swallowed every sound after the first syllable.

As if it didn't want anyone to hear him leave.

---

The air grew heavier the longer he stayed.

He lit his phone's torch and swept it across the walls. No windows. No gaps. Just stone and soot and the smell of something long buried.

He turned back to the bundle.

Still resting on the chair like it had been waiting.

He didn't want to touch it.

But he didn't want to stay in the dark either.

So he did.

---

Inside: more ash. Older. Packed tightly in a folded rag.

And beneath it—

A book.

Leather-bound. Moth-eaten. Pages warped with time and damp.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

It wasn't a diary.

It was a **record**.

Dates. Names. Places.

Every page, the same three things:

A name.

A cause.

A location.

He flipped to a marked page — dog-eared.

It had two entries:

**Amrita Joshi**

*Unrested — no rites performed*

*Near the river bend. 1991.*

And just beneath it:

**A. Joshi**

*Pending.*

*Awaiting a price.*

---

Arvind closed the book.

His fingers trembled.

---

A breath stirred behind him.

He turned.

Nothing.

The light flickered, then held.

Then a whisper — not a voice, not words.

Just presence.

Something **remembering**.

---

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He sat down against the far wall. The air pressed harder now. Like he wasn't meant to be standing anymore.

That's when he saw it — high in the corner of the room:

Charcoal marks.

Symbols. Circles.

And a single word:

**Return.**

He didn't know if it was a command.

Or a warning.

But something deep in his chest stirred — an ache he couldn't place.

Not grief. Not guilt.

Something older.

Like **fate.**

---

And then he remembered the dream.

From days ago. Maybe weeks.

He had been in a room like this. Sitting.

And someone had whispered:

“You were never supposed to come back.”

He had woken up thinking it was nonsense.

But now, it felt like a **memory.**

---

He looked back at the chair.

And in its place — not suddenly, not with fanfare — sat his father.

Not breathing. Not moving.

Just **sitting.**

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Ash falling softly from his shoulders, like snow.

Eyes open.

Watching.

## 10.2 The Price of Arrogance: *The Letter That Wasn't Meant for Him*

The man sitting in the chair didn't move.

Didn't blink.

But Arvind didn't question whether it was real.

He just... knew.

It wasn't a hallucination.

It wasn't a ghost.

It was something **between**.

The shape of his father.

The silence of what he never said.

---

And then it was gone.

No sound.

No smoke.

Just empty space again — and the bundle left behind.

---

Arvind crouched and sifted through the ash carefully.

This time, there was something wrapped beneath the fabric.

Not cloth.

Paper.

He opened it.

It was a **letter** — yellowed, folded into thirds, sealed with wax long cracked apart.

His hands trembled as he saw the name scrawled on the front.

**To Nandan.**

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He almost didn't open it.

Almost.

But something deep inside him — the part of him that had ignored every warning — told him this was his to read now.

So he did.

---

**Beta,**

If you're reading this, it means I've failed to protect you both.

Your mother was never supposed to die that way.  
She wasn't supposed to carry it.  
That was **my** burden.

But she tried to speak the name.  
She tried to save me.  
And instead... she became part of it.

I let them bury her wrong.  
I let her vanish without fire.  
I listened to fear, not faith.

And after that — I knew I had to keep you safe.  
I told Arvind to leave. I made him believe it was his choice.  
But it wasn't.

It was mine.

I thought if only one of you stayed... the Masan wouldn't need to take more.  
I was wrong.

Arvind is marked now. I don't know how.  
Maybe I wasn't the only one making choices in this house.  
Maybe fate finds its way, even through walls.

If it comes to it — don't run.  
Don't speak the name again.  
And don't offer yourself unless you're ready to never be the same.

Some debts can't be burned away.  
Some stay in the blood.

Arvind folded the letter slowly, his chest tight.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

He was never supposed to read this.

His father had made a deal.

**His whole life** — the city, the distance, the silence — had been orchestrated for protection.

And yet...

Here he was.

---

He sat down again.

The silence was different now.

Not suffocating.

Just still.

Like the room was **waiting** for what he'd do next.

---

Above him, on the ceiling, the word **Return** shifted — like ash caught in breath.

Beneath it, new words began to form.

Drawn in soot.

**Speak what was unsaid.**

**Or lose what you love.**

## 10.3 The Price of Arrogance: *The Ones Who Stayed*

Nandan woke with a start.

The lamp in his room had gone out.

No breeze.

No storm.

Just a sudden *stillness* that pressed down on his chest like weight.

He sat up and checked the room.

Arvind wasn't back.

And the bundle — the one they had sealed near the hearth — was gone.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

His heart dropped.

He didn't need to be told what had happened.

Arvind had gone back to the school.

And he hadn't taken the ash for a ritual.

He'd taken it **as an offering**.

---

By the time Nandan reached the school, the sky was that strange dull grey — not day, not night.

The gate was open again.

The same crack in the ground trailed from the front entrance, dragging ash like a dragged chain.

He followed it.

---

The east wing.

The sealed door.

Except now — there was no door at all.

Just a **hole in the wall**.

A passage.

The air that seeped through was warm.

Not comforting.

**Breathless.**

Like the place itself was exhaling, preparing to take something in.

---

He didn't hesitate.

He stepped inside.

---

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The corridor was narrow, but it didn't feel old.  
It felt... **unfinished**.  
Walls marked with handprints — some small, some burned.  
Every step stirred soot.

He turned a corner and stopped.

The trail ended in a room carved beneath the building's foundation.

It wasn't empty.

---

At the center of the floor sat Arvind.

Eyes closed.

Back straight.

He looked like he'd been there for hours — or centuries.

Before Nandan could speak, his brother opened his eyes.

"They marked us," Arvind said quietly.

"Not with fear. With silence."

---

Nandan stepped closer. "Come home."

"We don't have a home anymore."

"Yes, we do."

"No." Arvind looked past him. "We **had** a home. And we buried it. Without words. Without fire."

Nandan flinched.

But didn't deny it.

---

Then the ground shifted — not violently, but like **breathing earth**.

Ash curled up from the corners of the room.

From the walls.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

From the trail they had followed.

And in that smoke, shapes began to form.

Not people. Not spirits.

But moments.

---

Their mother, standing by the river.

Their father, lighting a fire without saying a word.

The old principal, walking out of the school one last time — leaving the door unlocked behind him.

And something else.

The **figure**.

The thing that had whispered. Knocked. Waited.

It stood at the room's edge now.

Silent.

Watching.

Waiting.

---

Nandan looked at Arvind.

“You didn't call it, did you?”

Arvind didn't answer.

Because he hadn't.

It had always been here.

They just hadn't been ready to see it.

## **10.4 The Price of Arrogance: *The Debt Was Never Yours***

The figure stood still.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

It didn't speak.

Didn't move.

But its presence filled the room like a second atmosphere — heavier, darker, older.

Ash stirred with every breath the brothers took.

Nandan reached for Arvind's arm. "Come with me. Whatever this is, we can finish it together."

But Arvind shook his head. "That's not how this works."

He stood slowly, facing the figure.

The shape was clearer now.

**No face. No voice. Just memory.**

The shifting flickers began again — across its form:

A flash of their mother's silhouette.

Their father's silent grief.

The burned face of the old principal.

The boy from the river, eyes wide with terror.

And then—

**Nandan.**

---

The entity raised a hand.

Its fingers cracked apart like dry branches. No blood. No skin. Just smoldering bark and something pulsing underneath — like a slow heartbeat made of heat and smoke.

It pointed at Arvind.

Then turned its palm toward Nandan.

The voice came — not spoken, but inside both of them:

"He lit the pyre."

"He spoke the silence."

"He stayed."

Then — to Arvind:

"You were taken away. Protected. Forgotten. But the debt was never yours."

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Arvind's throat tightened. "Then why now? Why me?"

"Because you returned."

The air seemed to squeeze in closer around them.

"This place remembers what you try to bury."

---

Nandan stepped forward, eyes locked on the Masan.

"Then take me."

Arvind grabbed his brother's shoulder. "No. You don't get to offer yourself."

Nandan's eyes glistened — not with fear, but **resolve**.

"I already did. The night I stayed. The night I didn't speak her name."

His voice cracked.

"She waited for someone to finish it. And I didn't."

---

The entity's hand opened wider.

Ash fell from its palm like time itself unraveling.

The faces flickered again, cycling through the ones it had taken.

Each pause wasn't just a memory.

It was a **price**.

A toll the village had paid again and again. And the Joshi family had always been at its center.

---

The voice came once more.

"There is no choice left."

Nandan exhaled. "Then take it from me. And leave him."

The figure paused.

The flickering faces stopped.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

Then —

**Dissolved.**

Exploded outward in a cloud of black smoke and grey ash.

It rushed toward Nandan — not like wind, but like gravity — as if his body had called it home.

---

He acted before his body could betray him.

In a single, desperate movement, Arvind lunged at Nandan — not to shield him, but to save him.

Nandan shouted in surprise, struggling, but Arvind was faster.

From his pocket, he pulled the tiny shard of bark he had hidden — the crushed herb he had gathered from the forest days ago, when all other plans had failed.

Arvind jammed the splinter into Nandan's upper arm — a fast, shallow jab, just enough to flood his blood.

Nandan gasped.

His knees buckled.

He dropped hard to the ground, his body going still as stone.

Ash settled over his back, like a shawl.

Arvind fell to his knees beside him, heart breaking.

Forgive me, Bhai, he thought. Please understand.

---

The figure raised its hand.

Its fingers cracked apart like dry branches.

Faces rippled through its shifting form — mother, father, brother, stranger.

It pointed once — at Nandan's crumpled body.

Then at Arvind.

Then at nothing at all.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The air twisted, pulled, screamed.

And then —

Ash exploded outward, hissing against the walls like dry rain.

The Masan dissolved into smoke.

The mist cleared.

Silent.

Breathless.

## 10.5 The Price of Arrogance: *The Price of Arrogance*

Arvind wasn't sure if the herb-splinter had actually stopped Nandan's heart — even for a few minutes.

Nandan lay motionless on the ground.

For minutes, maybe longer, there was nothing.

Then —

his chest rose and fell, slow and shallow.

But his eyes stayed closed.

Arvind allowed himself a small smile — a fragile thread of hope.

Maybe it had worked.

Maybe they had fooled the Masan.

Maybe Masan had taken what it wanted — but couldn't claim Nandan's soul because, for a few moments, his heart had stopped.

He crouched beside Nandan, trembling, and placed a hand over his brother's.

Warm — but not the warmth of life.

Warm like embers, hidden deep in ash, refusing to die out.

"Please," he whispered. "Stay with me."

Nandan didn't stir.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

The Masan was gone.

At least, from this room.

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Hours blurred together.

The night stretched thin.

When Nandan finally moved, it wasn't like waking.

It was like forgetting.

He looked up at Arvind, blinking slowly, as if he didn't know where he was.

"Did we... do it?" he rasped.

Arvind forced a nod. "You're okay."

But deep down, he knew it wasn't true.

Not fully.

---

They walked home together in silence.

No one in the village saw them return.

That night, Arvind sat alone on the porch, staring at the dark sky.

Inside, Nandan slept fitfully — sometimes flinching, sometimes whispering names.

Names that weren't their own.

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In the weeks that followed, the village changed.

The heavy, suffocating air near the school lifted.

The old peepal tree no longer groaned after sunset.

The knocking never came again.

The village dared to breathe a little easier.

But Arvind knew better.

The Masan hadn't been defeated.

# Masan

*Curse of the forgotten* by Swapnilkumar Patel

It had only shifted.

It was patient.

It was watching.

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One evening, Arvind returned to the school.

Not to teach.

Just to stand there.

Just to feel it.

The corridors were silent now.

The cold was gone.

But the memories clung to the walls.

He walked to the principal's office.

His old desk still stood, the surface dusty but untouched.

Scratched faintly into the wood:

**Amrita.**

And beneath it, in lighter strokes:

**Arvind.**

He reached out.

Paused.

Then turned away without touching it.

Some things were better left to rest.