

A black and white photograph of a person standing on a hill, silhouetted against a hazy, dawn-like sky. The person is standing with their back to the camera, looking out over the horizon. The sky is a mix of dark and light grey, suggesting the soft light of dawn. The foreground is dark, and the background shows some trees and foliage.

THE

DAWN

A book by Abhishek Vagh

Chapter 1

With hazy vision, caused by the sudden rush of blood through the tiny vessels of his eyes, he awoke with a jerk in his body. Still unable to grasp his surroundings, his gaze wandered around as if he were lost in a desert. After a few slow, uneven breaths, he came back to his senses, though he still couldn't remember how or when he had fallen asleep last night.

Lowering his legs to the side of the bed, he reached for his phone on the small table beside him. It showed 5:54. He unlocked it and saw a message: "Hey, it's me." An unknown Telegram account. Of course, he knew exactly who it was.

With no thoughts or questions in his mind—yet a whole future taking shape somewhere in the subconscious—he got up from the bed and walked to the common washroom on the seventh floor of the boys' hostel. A few splashes of water on his face made him feel lighter, almost awake. On the way back to his room, a thought struck him: I won't let her go this time.

He saw the notification again. Resisting the urge to drift into the past, he looked around his room. His roommates were still asleep. The window beside his bed revealed a dawn he had never noticed in his entire life. The hostel faced the college building on the opposite side. On the right side of the building, the sky was orange at the bottom and purple above. On the left, it was still dark, almost night-like.

It had been a few months since he arrived in this unfamiliar city to study. He talked nicely to everyone—not because he expected kindness back, but because it felt like something carved into his bones. He was still immature, though.

He never felt whole in his body. There were two selves inside him: one that reacted to the world, and one that reacted only to himself. The one who faced others was kind, funny, and far too innocent for a place like this. But the one who faced himself was a devil — the version of him that never let him sleep at night, never allowed him to feel happy even when he finally

had a moment he deserved. Whenever he was alone, he became destructive to his own soul. Yet whenever he was with his peers, he felt his energy drain away, like sand pouring through a fist.

He had never liked anything in his life. The only desire he ever truly had was to be loved by someone. He loved his parents, yet he was terrified of being exposed as a coward — a failed child. So he always pretended to be strong in front of them. But deep down, he was frightened. Frightened of everything. Every person. Every place. Everything. And in the depths of his subconscious, something far more serious was happening.

To the abstractions of mankind he surrendered his sanity, emotions meant nothing to him anymore, nor the opinions of his peers. He was building walls — no, a fortress — with big thick walls cannot be broken by nobody — around his fragile core. And all of it was taking place in the deep, dismal chambers of his subconscious. Thoughts he once feared to even glance at began to reveal themselves with brutal clarity. Soon, he accepted death as the most sophisticated companion of life. He could no longer feel the emotions that once broke him, yet he remembered their weight, as if memory were the last organ still capable of bleeding.

Soon, our hero was ready. Ready for the world. A man the world always deserved. Had he become aggressive?—No. By no means was he aggressive, he was never brutal. So what did change in him? We will dive into the things that changed in him. But for now my dear readers, we'll see our immature and innocent hero.

Foggy light was coming through the window, outlining the tables, chairs and cupboards in the ill-lit room. Sitting on the chair and checking his mobile, he saw another message from the same Telegram account, sent 3 minutes ago:

“Are you awake?”

By this time he failed to control thinking about her. She rushed into his mind like horses on the warfield. With a mixture of all the emotions, he replied:

“Yes.”

Instantly a message came from the other side:

“Why did you wake up so early?”

“Why did you message me?” he asked.

“What do you mean why? You didn’t like I came back?”

“That is not what I asked,” he replied.

“Abhi, the past two months were so painful to me.”

“You always had my number, why did you not call me earlier?”

“It’s not like I didn’t want to, but I just didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Why do you always say these things like you really care about me?”

“I do care about you, Abhi.”

“I don’t understand you, Sneha.”

After typing the message, he turned off the internet and went for a short walk to the open campus connecting the backside of the college building and the front of both hostels.

He ordered a cup of tea in the dead, lifeless canteen of the college. No one was in the canteen. Birds’ chirping could be heard while he sat on the stool facing the hostels. Small plants planted on both sides of the road could be seen. Hazy clouds were very far behind the hostel buildings. A crow perched on the left edge of the terrace of the boys’ hostel. A fuzzy voice came from behind the window of the canteen:

“Tea’s ready.”

He went and came back with the cup of tea to the same stool and sat there again. Again, his gaze wandered for the crow. There was nothing at the edge

of the terrace of the boys' hostel. Suddenly, as if he gained awareness, he began searching for the crow from one edge to another of both the buildings in front of him. His thoughts became unsteady.

But the hero always thought that every situation he could control. He took a few slow breaths and took a short sip from the cup written "coffe" on it. Things like this always struck him. He always noticed every flaw within his understanding.

If they have a factory to make cups, why don't they cross-check the spelling of coffee once? this thought struck him while sipping tea from the cup.

Another thought came: If they are making tea every day, why not measure sugar for one jar? The tea was very sweet. There was no taste like tea. But at least it could convince someone that it's tea. Thinking this, he finished his tea.

He paid for the tea and got out from the canteen, which was on the left of the backside of the college. On his way back to his room in the hostel, he found a pigeon dead on the lawn in the very centre of the campus, probably killed by electric shock. He felt sorry for it and continued his walk to his room.

"I cannot depend on anyone for the rest of my life by running away from my emptiness and loneliness," the thought struck him on the way to the mess for lunch. Taking his food, he sat at the corner of the mess hall, alone on the whole row. He leaned over his dish and began to eat.

"It doesn't deserve to be called as food," he thought when he took the first bite of roti and tasteless sabji. As a storyteller, even i myself don't know what that sabji was. That is quite peculiar you may think but even the cook didn't know the name of dish they make.

The guilt of not being able to finish his dish bothered him. He tried to eat but couldn't finish. He left the hostel building and reached the main gate of the college campus. He wrote his name on the register titled "In-Out."

It was a very hot summer day. The sun was scorching through his shirt into his skin. Waiting at the crossroad for a shuttle, he spent a few minutes standing there. His shirt was dripping with sweat. It was quite fortunate for him that there were no other passengers in the car — just a driver and a slim, dark-skinned guy sitting beside him in the front. He sat behind.

In a few minutes, he was in the city. He paid the driver and began walking toward — (he still had no idea why he came to the city) — Lapinoz Pizzeria. He went inside and sat at a tall, small table in the corner, facing the road on the other side of the glass.

He sat there without checking the menu and ordered a Double Cheese Margherita with extra cheese, and a cheese garlic bread.

I told you, my dear fellow reader. he is innocent.

Chapter 2

As he was waiting for his order to arrive, he glanced out through the glass towards the buildings. On the road between the buildings and the pizzeria, cars and motorcycles were passing; very soft sounds of honks drifted inside. Soft music was playing in the pizzeria.

“Is it really peace, or just emptiness?” he thought.

At that moment, he was thinking about peace—when a very beautiful girl entered the pizzeria, walking slowly with tiny steps. Her short hair swung over her shrunken shoulders. Her eyes sparkled like stardust in a deep black sky. She wore a full-sleeve yellow kurti with a necklace-like design around the neck, and blue relaxed jeans that swung as she walked.

“This can’t be.” Bewildered by the scene, he thought.

She walked to the tall, small table where he sat and took the tall stool in front of him. Breaking the silence, she spoke:

“Hello, Abhi.”

“What are you doing here, Sneha?” he asked, refusing to be convinced that it could be real by any chance.

“I came to you, since you didn’t reply to my messages.”

“But how could you come here in no time?” he asked, puzzled.

“Is this what you’re going to ask on our first date?”

“For now, let’s just spend this day beautifully. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Are we going to meet again?” he asked.

“Of course we will, Abhi,” she said, smiling through her eyes. “What did you order?”

He told her what he ordered, and somehow it made her laugh so hard.

“I knew you like cheese, but seriously?” she tried to speak between uncontrollable laughter. “Double cheese Margherita with extra cheese?”

Once again, he fell for the beautiful eyes of hers—realizing that he was the reason she was laughing.

“I missed you so much, Sneha,” he whispered.

“So did I. It was the consequence we had to go through. But now we’re together again.”

“I’m glad you came back,” he whispered again.

“Shhh... wanna go watch a movie?” she said.

“I know a movie — it’s very bad. I’m sure no one else is going to watch it except us. What do you say?”

“Alright, Sneha, we can go for a movie. But why the bad one?” he asked.

“So we can have time for cuddles, stupid.”

A sweet wave of happiness wrapped over him like a blanket.

But then, as he noticed the other tables, chairs and counter, they were becoming visible only against a thick, black darkness that was constantly growing. The furniture started to move away into the dark space. He couldn’t understand what was happening.

He looked at Sneha. Her emotionless, dead face was moving away from him while she still sat on the chair. His eyes were screaming as he watched his beloved drifting away from him. His own heartbeat thumped in his ears, sinking into the dark space that kept expanding.

“Would you take Coke or Fanta, sir?”

Snap.

He blinked. And as he opened his eyes, everything was normal.

But there was no Sneha.

His heartbeat still wouldn't slow down.

His eyes were still frightened.

“Coke... please,” he answered.

On the table, his garlic bread and Margherita with cheese dripping down the sides, were getting colder.

After eating, he paid his bill and came out of the pizzeria.

It was almost 4 p.m. The sun was still as intense as it was before. In no time, he was sweating again. Looking at his feet while walking towards the theatre, he thought:

“Everything would have made sense only if she were here with me.”

He checked the list of movies hanging at the window of the only small theatre in the city. He bought the ticket for a corner seat.

The movie was very boring, but his thoughts were far somewhere else. He took out his mobile, expecting to see her messages again. There was no message.

In fact, there was no Telegram account of Sneha.

She went again.

As if his heart wandering alone in the middle of a dense forest without a body. That was exactly what he was feeling.

The movie ended. He got out of the theatre. At the corner of the road there was a stall, he bought a single cigarette from there and lit it with the lighter provided by the owner of the stall.

Taking a very deep drag of smoke into his lungs, he felt the stillness around him. In just three deep smokes, the cigarette was over.

From there he made his way towards the hostel, took a rickshaw from the crossroad, and went back to his hostel again.