

Shelter Beyond Walls

Fear came in waves that night, crashing harder each time the doctor disappeared behind the swinging doors. Mia breathed shakily into her frigid fingers, her eyes fluttering anxiously to the hour hand. Five hours. That's how long the nurses and doctor had gone without telling her anything. That's how long the watery coffee sat on the sterilized counter of the table in front of her. That's how long Mia had to listen to the constant drip of a leaking faucet, the flickering lightbulbs mirroring her fluttery heartbeats.

The squeaks of the rubber soles of the nurses created a rhythm that reflected Mia's growing nervousness, and her breaths started to shorten and quicken as panic slowly consumed her mind, her heart going a thousand miles per hour.

A warm, calloused hand enclosed her twitching fingers as Noah whispered into her ear, "Breathe, Mia. Slow and deep."

His deep voice brought stability in this chaotic moment. She focused on it instead of the squeaks of the nurses' shoes or the flickering of the lightbulbs above them. Warmth from Noah's hands spread and managed to push out some of the fear in her, as Mia slowed her breathing.

It was 3 a.m., and six hours ago, Noah had left his night shift the moment news of Mia's brother's car crash came to him via text, to stay by Mia's side since he knew how close she and her brother were.

Mia held her breath as the doctor walked briskly out of the ICU room, prying the green gloves off of his hands as he went. Nothing. Her foot tapped faster against the white tiles of the hospital floor. Mia let out a frustrated sigh that ruffled the strands of hair that had strayed from her tight ponytail over this long wait. Noah squeezed her hand again, a soft reminder to calm down and not let the panic consumer her mind again.

Mia didn't know what she would've done without Noah by her side tonight. He was a silent harbor that held her in place even when the ocean of fear crashed inside her mind. Whether it be through his reassuring squeezes or waiting by her side, his presence filled her with a strength and hope that she desperately needed at a time like this.

For the first time that night, Mia loosened her grip on her own trembling hands.

Sometimes people cannot fix the storm, only sit beside you through it.

Not all shelters are built from physical presence, though.

The bus rocked back and forth, jostling the people within. Sunlight filtered through the fogged glass and landed on a faded lime green jacket. Aarti's eyes flicked to the jacket, hanging off the seat in front of her. Time slowed as her mind took her to an old memory, fresh as the monsoon rain she once danced through.

Gaya, her best friend, giggles as she pulls Aarti behind the pot of tomato plants, the fruits cherry red, as Arun's footsteps echo down the open hallway. "Shhhhhh," whispers Gaya, as they duck behind the pots right before Arun steps into the garden. Gaya's lime green jacket gets caught in the leaves of the plant, and Arun notices it. The giggles from that day filled Aarti's mind as the bus jostled her back to the present.

She left India three months ago to move to California, and every second of her new life, all she wanted was to return to the life she had left behind. Even in crowded lecture halls, part of her mind remained thousands of miles away.

But sitting here next to some random university student, Aarti realized that memories like this one don't always have to leave us feeling hollow in the heart, leaving a space that heartache soon fills. Through the echoes of the giggles still in her ears and the fresh scent of tomatoes and Gaya's lavender perfume that she still remembers, Aarti understood that memories are there to fill you, not dig a hole in your heart.

The university bus hissed to a halt, and as Aarti picked herself up, a twinge of nostalgia followed by a feeling of fullness settled inside her. She carried all her memories with her on her journey no matter how much life changes, and it makes her who she is. Memories aren't meant to be forgotten, you don't "move on" from a time that precious. It stays with you, becoming a part of the person you carry into every new place.

Sometimes belonging isn't found in golden memories, but in the quiet familiarity of ordinary days.

The silver Volvo comes to a stop, Willow slightly leaning forward into her seatbelt. She turns to her mom to say "I love you" before getting off, and a strained smile spreads on her mom's face, which visibly showed the toll that last night's argument with Willow's dad had on her.

Slowly shutting her car door, Willow sulks to the entrance of her school, her mood damp with last night's storm, replaying the argument in her mind. Exhausted from a sleepless night, Willow glances upwards and the sun looks upon her in the blue sky, as bright as always.

As soon as she steps into her 10th grade class, the familiarity of the room envelops her in a warm hug. The squeaky footsteps of the boys chasing each other through the desks, the smell

of warm blueberry pancakes that her classmate shares with everyone every morning, the flipping of pages of homework being finished at the last minute.

For the first time, Willow's grip on her backpack loosens as she takes in a deep breath and looks around at her friends who've been her classmates since grade 6. It's different today. Her heart beats slower, her mind clears, her mood brightens, at the sight of the classroom she goes to every day. She notices the small things around her and takes them in slower now, as if savoring it. It brings her peace to belong to such a place, to be part of such a familiar rhythm. Willow realizes that she can't control what's happening at home, that she can't stop the arguments, but she can find comfort in the familiarity around her right now.

Sometimes, a place that remains steady even when everything else seems to shift beneath your feet can be all the shelter you need.

Shelter is often referred to as four sturdy walls and a roof overhead, protecting us from the storms outside. Yet, some of life's strongest storms cannot be escaped by simply stepping indoors. Fear, grief, uncertainty, longing, and change follow us wherever we go. So, in moments like these, shelter takes on a different meaning.

For Mia, it was Noah's unwavering presence in a hospital waiting room. For Aarti, it was the memories that allowed her to carry *home* with her everywhere she went. For Willow, it was the familiar rhythm of a classroom that remained steady when everything else seemed uncertain. Though each person found safety and belonging in a different form, they all discovered the truth: shelter is not always found within walls.