

An work of Art

Eeman Majumder



Chapter 1 - The Order of Divija's World

The spines of my books are my first line of defense, a perfectly vertical barricade against the formless drift of my thoughts. I adjust a hardcover technical manual by a fraction of a millimeter, seeking the exact alignment that might finally quiet the rising static in my mind. Every textbook and dog-eared novel represents a small, calculated victory over the entropic slide of my life. As the afternoon light struggles to penetrate the fine haze of dust motes suspended in the air, my knuckles turn white against the paper edges. I refuse to look at the clock; to acknowledge the time is to admit that this manufactured stillness is already beginning to evaporate.

My apartment is a study in desaturation—a calculated blend of slate greys and washed-out blues designed to provide a neutral canvas for an overstimulated mind. As the sun dips, the shadows in the corners stretch like long, thin fingers, pulling at the edges of my composure. I feel a phantom sensation rising in my chest, a wisp of smoke from a fire I don't remember lighting, hovering just beyond the reach of my understanding. I take a shallow breath, tasting the acidity of cold espresso and something sharper—a metallic tang that signals the coming of the hush.

I retreat to my desk, sweeping aside yesterday's scribbled notes as if clearing the debris from an old battlefield. The monitor flickers into

being, its sterile blue glow washing over me like cold moonlight in a cathedral where I've forgotten the prayers. The silence here is heavy, a physical weight that pulses in time with my own heartbeat. It feels viscous, as if the air itself is thickening into something I can no longer breathe. Deep in the recesses of my consciousness, a voice I've tried to silence warns me that the silver hush is no longer just at the door—it's already in the room.

Chapter 2

The code window burns like a blade against my night. It sits in the center of my screen — a white rectangle with a cursor that blinks like a pulse — and I lean toward it as if proximity could force the answer out of the pixels. Rain runs slow on the glass behind me, a felted hand against the windowpane. The apartment hums: radiator, distant traffic like a low boat engine, the refrigerator's soft shudder. Somewhere below, someone leaves a stereo on; a bass line vibrates the thin plaster. The world has its rhythms and I have mine, stitched together by small compulsions: finish the bug, send the commit, preserve the sequence and then, only then, can I finally rest.

My fingers are already rehearsing the keystrokes. A variable name sits stubbornly wrong in the middle of the function — `sequenceCounter` — off by one, sending a ripple of off-by-one errors through the nightly batch. I have twenty minutes until the end-of-day deadline the client set in their terse email. Twenty minutes is a small, manageable thing. I have met far smaller.

I turn the mug at my elbow. Coffee has congealed at the lip like tar; its skin wrinkles when I touch it. The smell is acrid and warm. I drink,

and the coffee leaves a metallic aftertaste that I tidy under my tongue like another note in a list. I close the terminal, open the file I call `main_service.js`, and find the line that is making the system spit.

My hands move in the practiced way of someone who has taught herself to be small and efficient. Type; backspace; type again. I comment things in my journal with timestamps — 00:38:42 — because time is permission to be exact. The screen throws light across the plane of my face; the whites make the room a shallow bowl of shadow and glare. My shoulders are wired high, my jaw thin. I am brittle but practiced.

Then the sound folds inward.

It is not the rain that changes. It is the room's ability to carry sound. One moment the hum is there, the next the hum recedes as if a hand is slowly cupped over the apartment. The white of the code window loses its harshness and goes silver, like a photograph left out in the wrong sun. The air tastes metallic and sharp. I close my mouth in a reflex, because when the air tastes like that everything else comes out of phase.

An image slides under my skin so quickly it feels like a chemical reaction: a door slammed, not gently, the wooden edge hitting a frame and sending a quick white shock through the air; a child's bare feet — small, pale, slightly callused on the heels — hitting the linoleum in a hallway dim with a single light; a name called into that hallway and swallowed by a sound that props its mouth open and refuses to speak back. The name is one I have not used aloud in years.

I blink and the code looks wrong. The cursor has moved itself a few characters to the left. I think of the commit I need to make. Control the night so the hush can't find me, I tell myself, because naming the thing feels like an armor. I breathe shallowly, like a swimmer at the surface,

thinking rhythm will save me.

Rhythm does not save me.

I try to clamp the world back together the way I always do when something unthreads: by doing rituals that are small and sharp and therefore manageable. I force breaths. Inhale for four, hold for two, exhale for six. The counting is a metronome. I rewrite the same line of code until it reads right seven different ways, like washing a stain with new solvents. Each variant compiles but fails at runtime in a different place. I open the leather-bound journal that lives beside my keyboard and press the pen to page with a little violence, like pinning something down.

My handwriting blurs. The letters slide into each other until they look like a stranger's. I look at the line: 00:41:02 — FAIL — sequenceCounter off by one. My pen wants to write other things. The page offers itself willingly as a place to put the rest of the night. I make a to-do list the way one writes a prayer: LIST: 1) Fix off-by-one 2) Commit 3) Ship 4) Sleep. The list strokes into an eighth item my hand writes without permission: 8) Don't go. I stare at that line until the ink feels like a foreign object under my thumbnail.

Whispers rise behind my teeth, like someone slowly scraping the inside of a metal cup. They are not words at first, only the suggestion of syllables, the memory of conversations that happened in rooms with other appliances and different wallpapers. I press my palms flat against my desk. The wood is cold and slightly tacky from years of thumb oil. I count paperclips pulled from a metal tin — one, two, three. It steadies me for a beat. Then I count them again because numbers are a bridge. Paperclips: twelve. Pens aligned in a near-military row. The nearest pen

stands a millimeter askew and my arm wants to straighten it.

Outside, the rain gets heavier, a fingernail dragging. The clock in the corner of my screen keeps its indifferent face: 00:49:11. The ninety-minute program we have runs on minutes like a patient on a schedule. I am supposed to deliver order; I am supposed to make stitches where the system will not yet tear. Panic prickles at the edges like a rash I will not scratch in public. Concentration leaks away in a slow, greasy film.

At 00:52:37 I try a fix that once worked for a similar bug: explicitly cast the sequence length before the modulo operation. The test suite runs. All green. Relief is a small, bright stone and I cradle it. I prepare the commit message: FIX: handle sequence length cast to prevent off-by-one. My cursor rests above the commit button. The ritual sequence completes itself in a mechanical line: commit, push, message, confirm. Control the night so the hush can't find me.

Then I hear the door in the hallway — not the real door to my apartment but the memory door — swing inward. My body understands that swing as a threat and an invitation. It is always worse at the threshold; it knows where I let people in. I stand because that is what the night says to do: do not sleep, do not let the mattress eat you when it is this thin.

I tell myself to press the commit and be done. I move my hand and the air is so thick and cold I feel a physical resistance, like swimming through syrup. The silver light is thicker now, and the whispers have almost become phrases. The phrases have texture: one sounds like cotton, another like small bells. My throat tightens.

"Just do it," I say aloud to the empty apartment, because sometimes hearing the sound of my own voice anchors me. The words fall flat

against the hush and come back altered, like a record played too slowly:
"Just do it."

I want to sleep because that is where the hush always deepens and becomes predictable. I tell myself I will get in bed and the hush will be less aggressive there, a whisper instead of a shove. Sleep will bury it — night as compost. My hand moves toward the laptop's lid. The commit still sits there like an accusation in draft form. I could push it and call the night mine again.

Instead, I lay myself down on the mattress because sleep is a ritual I have performed my whole life when things feel like they might break. I slide under the duvet and the sheets smell faintly of the lemon detergent I buy in big bottles and the city air that whistles around the window seals. The mattress yields the exact amount it always does: a little softness at the shoulders, a more resistant hip. Being in bed feels like a second skin, familiar and unthreatening.

But the mattress is not sleep tonight. It is an entry.

The hush deepens in a way my body recognizes with the intimacy of muscle memory. It makes the seams between moments give; fragments that used to hover separately start to click together into architecture. A lamp appears to my left — the lamp I had in another life, the one with the fringe and a small brown shade. It casts a small, tired circle of light. A suitcase sits half-zipped on the floor, canvas blue with the stiffer smell of old detergent trapped inside. The zipper teeth are a soft metallic clatter. There is an absence in the doorway: the space the person has left, almost visible as a cold wreath around the doorknob.

Being in that room again is not nostalgic. It is precise and cruel in the way only small children's rooms can be: every object a witness, every

scuff on the skirting board a ledger entry. The plaster by the doorway has a pencil mark where someone once measured height — tiny four-year-old scribbles halfway down, the lead dulled by time. The lamplight makes the marks look like a miniature skyline. The corridor outside smells like the back seat of a car: upholstery dust, a pocket of lavender from a sachet long since flattened to a memory.

I am ambushed by the sound of that door closing. In my memory the wood rebukes the frame with a last, muted swear, then silence. After the door, there is the hallway: a long thin place lined with those impossible family pictures — someone smiling with their mouth open for the camera; the dog with its ears up — all of them frozen like sea creatures suspended in amber. In the real apartment, the radiator clicks. In my memory, the radiator clicks too but it's different: thinner, like a lighter.

I have the same choice I have always had in these nights: fight until I dissolve into static, or let the memory have me and see what it's carrying. In the past I have fought and woken up with my teeth clenched and the smell of smoke under my tongue. In the past I have slept and the morning presented itself the same as every other morning, dull as a coin. Tonight, something about the hush feels less like an attack and more like a hinge opening.

Fear thins into something else — not bravery, not quite, but a curious, aching permission. There is a part of me that wants to take the Polaroid and pin it back together: that old trick of placing pieces on the table and knowing which one goes where. A smaller part knows the truth of how memory works — it is not a jigsaw you can reconstruct; it is more like smoke pressed into a shape. I close my eyes because closing them is the same as opening a door in this world.

I stop resisting.

The image pours in with a physical force I didn't expect. Sounds lace themselves into vocabulary. The unsaid becomes audible.

I see him — or rather, I see him as he left, the exact angle of his arm at the hinge, the tilt of his chin toward the street, the way his coat caught at the knee and the hem smelled like petrol and aftershave and two different laundries. He does not turn back. He does not look at me the way I have imagined 1,000 times in rehearsal. He does not say what I am about to say now.

"Why did you go?" My voice is small. It tips the air and makes dust look like stars. I have never asked him that. I have asked it inside my head until it became an exhausted wheel.

Something answers. Not with words, at first, but with the freight of a lifetime of unsaid sentences. The answer presses into my ribs like warm metal. I feel heat climb the back of my tongue, and an involuntary sound comes out of me — a small laugh that has edges of a sob. It is raw and ridiculous and honest in a way I have worked to keep tidy.

"Because I couldn't stay," the hush says, but not in the voice of my father or the man who left. It is other: it borrows cadence from the room's radiator, from the hinge on the door, from the way my childhood self used to say please too loudly. It is wrong to call it his voice because it is everything that voice was in the moments when it did not speak. It is the meaning folded into silence.

I taste something metallic and sweet. I can feel my palms go damp. The child in the memory — me — folds herself small. Her feet make an almost inaudible scuff on the linoleum as she drags her heel, but that scuff is a geography. The duvet I lay on now is suddenly as thin as a

sheet. I can count the threads in the blanket's weave like a census.

I ask another question I have not allowed myself to speak: "Did you ever look back?"

A pause so long it becomes a physical presence. Then the hush answers again, with images instead of sounds: a cigarette stubbed in an ashtray, a bus that would not stop, a packet of letters in a drawer marked with dates only I can read. It shows me the way my small hands gripped the edge of the doorknob and felt the paint under my nails. It shows me the echo of his shoes down the hallway. It shows me, for a breath, the shape of my own face in the dark catch in the doorway — rounder then, cheeks soft, hair tangled.

When the hush speaks it does not accuse. It does not say what I have been rehearsing — that he left because he did not love me enough, because he loved something else, because he was afraid of being pinned down. Instead, it says the true thing, which is worse and kinder at once: "I did not know how to carry you."

That admission is a small, lethal thing. I do not know why it drops into the center of me like a new coin, but it fits. It changes the tilt of everything. The version of me that built routines and lists and variables out of fear — the version who thinks control will stave off abandonment — understands, in a more primitive way than thought, that some things cannot be controlled because they were never meant to be kept.

My shoulders go hollow, and I involuntarily laugh again, a dry, single, short sound that might be my sob. It surprises me into a new honesty. Tears — small, red — press against the bottom of my eyelids and threaten to fall. I breathe in small measured grabs and let them out. There is a taste of relief that is so sharp it could cut.

The hush shifts. It is not only a thing that takes; it is also a hinge. Where once it had felt like a thief raking through my life, now I feel it opening a room I have been avoiding. The room smells like the night on the day he left — faint citrus and the wet wool of a coat — and it smells like the laundry detergent my mother used after a long workday. It is messy; it is human.

When the hush releases its hold, the apartment is unchanged in its surfaces. The lamp over my desk still throws the same small pool of light. The mug at my elbow is ringed with congealed coffee. The code window still glows, the cursor a steady blink. But something is different: there is evidence of the night outside my skin.

I turn my head. On the pillow beside my folded duvet sits a Polaroid, faded like something left too long in a wallet. It is small and square and when I pick it up the emulsion leaves a faint residue on my finger. The image is of a lamp with fringe, a canvas suitcase half-zipped, and a hallway that tilts oddly to the left. My breath catches because I recognize every item and I do not own that lamp, nor have I seen that exact suitcase in years. The photograph is from another life yet its colors are the exact ones that live in my memory.

Beside the Polaroid is a scrap of paper, the sort you tear from the corner of a used envelope. The handwriting across it is my handwriting, the same slant, the way my g loops back like a tiny hook, the hurried tail on my y. The words are simple, as if someone wrote them and then worried and then wrote them again: Maya — meet me at the bus stop? The name is the one I have not used in years — a childhood nickname my absent parent used sometimes on the good days, the one I promised myself I would bury under my adult name and routines. I did not expect

to see it again. I did not expect my own hand to have written it.

My fingers shake as they hover over the note. The apartment smells of wet pavement and coffee and the metallic tang of the hush that lingers like a bruise. Relief and dread sit side by side in my chest like alien roommates. Relief because the hush has given me a shape to what I felt; dread because it has left a physical trace. If it can leave proof in the world — a photograph, a note — then it is no longer only an interior failure. It is a presence that intersects with objects, that can alter the ledger of my life in a way that will be visible to other people, to me.

I feel the weight of the laptop at the edge of the bed. The commit drafts itself as a small relic of the night: an unresolved obligation sitting in my repository, a small circle of possibility. The phone on my bedside table is a dark black disc. I do not check it because phones are antennas and I am not ready to know if anyone else received a message that says the things I just felt. I am not ready to know if the hush has started leaving artifacts in places beyond my pillow.

I fold the Polaroid into my palm and think about the variable in the code called `sequenceCounter`, the way it miscounts by one when something misaligns. A hidden shift in a runtime can throw an entire system off. I think of how memories miscount; one omission echoes and multiplies into a life.

There is a sound I have not heard before: a faint, tentative knock on my door. Not the slam of the memory door, but a living, human knock, measured and a little uncertain. The hush has made contact with the physical. I am no longer sure which is more terrifying — the memory itself or the fact that it left a footprint so visible I cannot pretend everything is normal.

I put the Polaroid face down on the duvet because looking at it feels like reading my own handwriting in a language I had forgotten how to speak. I fold the scrap of paper into the Polaroid like a small secret. The rain picks up its tempo against the window and the radiator clicks in a rhythm that is not quite a heartbeat. The commit waits unsent on the laptop, the cursor blinking a quiet question in the dark.

I have twenty minutes, more or less, before the world begins again and I must present a face that resembles competence. I have to decide: do I push the commit and reassert the habitual small tyrannies that keep my life aligned, or do I follow the note and the Polaroid and see where this hinge opens in the daylight? The decision is no longer merely about code. It is about whether I will treat the hush as an interior emergency to be medicated quietly with rituals, or as a visitor that leaves maps on my pillow and therefore requires a different kind of response.

My hands are still damp from the Polaroid's edge. The paper feels like the body of a small animal and I cradle it with a tenderness that surprises me. The hush has not only shown me something; it has left me with a breadcrumb. That breadcrumb is an accusation and an invitation.

I reach for the laptop with one hand. My other hand hovers above the Polaroid like someone deciding whether to step into cold water. The clock in the corner of my screen blinks 01:17:03. Outside, the city's noise makes a soft, insulated roar, unaware of the small catastrophes that unfold within apartments. The knock at the door goes again, this time firmer, as if someone on the other side has decided to stay put until an answer comes.

I press the trackpad, the page flickers to life, and the cursor is a small impatient thing. The commit window sits open with its message

like a vow I can either keep or let break. I think about sequences and about the way a missing element can rip the pattern. I think about being small and about the ways I count things to carve a life out of the vague.

I do not yet know whether the Polaroid will be consolation or threat. I do not yet know whether the hush leaves breadcrumbs because it wants me to follow or because it wants me to prove it exists. I do not yet know which version of myself will pick up the phone if it rings, or who might be on the other side of the door.

But I know this: the apartment is not the only ledger. My body and the room I told myself I could build from lists and variables now share an entry. The hush has made a mark in the world beyond my own perception. Where once my fear was a private apparatus, now it has left evidence. The choice of what to do with that evidence sits heavy and luminous between the laptop and the Polaroid, between the commit and the door knock.

My thumb rests on the trackpad. My other hand closes around the Polaroid. I do not press commit. I do not yet get up. The hush has opened a hinge and the night will not let me put it back on its pin. The knock comes again, slow and turned inward, and I realize, with an odd, frightened clarity, that my life has become a question someone else could answer if they chose to knock long enough.