

The Silence that Breathes

At first, you don't notice how quiet it's gotten.

It's slow, like day turning to night; you never see the exact moment it happens.

The air used to hum with noise. Footsteps in the hallway, laughter from another room, the jokes from the movie. You used to be nervous about it all. Now you'd give anything to hear it again.

You start leaving the TV on, not to watch it, but to fill the air with voices. They don't talk to you, but at least they sound like what once was. At least they make the house feel *awake*.

The house almost sounds like it's breathing with you, slow, uneven. But alive.

You tell yourself it's fine. You tell yourself that being alone isn't the same as being *lonely*. But the words reflect back at you, empty. You talk just to prove you can still make sound. You laugh just to remember what laughter feels like. You tell yourself untruthful words, you say you're done, you've moved on, that past is the past, but the memories don't leave you, they never will, and all you said was a lie.

Sometimes you catch yourself searching up the names, looking at the pictures. You stand there staring at it, wondering who it was for. You leave it anyway.

You start to imagine the house awake. Each room feels like an ear pressed close to your chest. Every sigh, every shuffle of your feet, it remembers. You start apologizing out loud, but you're not sure who you're apologizing to.

It's strange how the absence of people can feel like a presence. It's like feeling watched, but not by eyes, rather something more. More like by the air itself, thick with what *used* to be here.

All of this to feel again. The worst of it comes at night when you need to sleep, but the silence kills the air, you start to suffocate, and you see them in your vision. You wonder if they see you, too. You wonder how they are, you'll never know, but they'll never know how you feel they'll never

One night, you open your mouth to speak to anyone, to the house, to yourself; no words come out. The silence is complete.

For a second, it feels peaceful.

Then it hits you. The house isn't breathing anymore.

Just you.

That's the scariest thing of all."