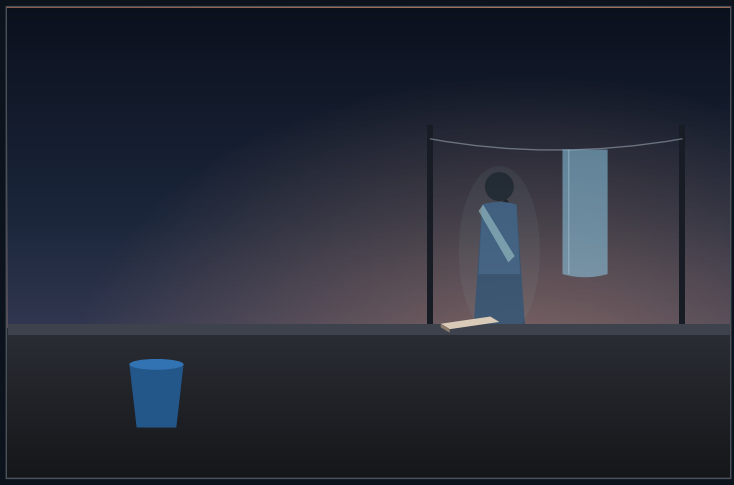
FICTION • SUPERNATURAL HORROR

THE GHOST ACROSS THE PARAPET

A Tale of Dawn, Memory, and the Unfinished



WRITTEN BY

AGNI SHARMAN

The Ghost Across the Parapet

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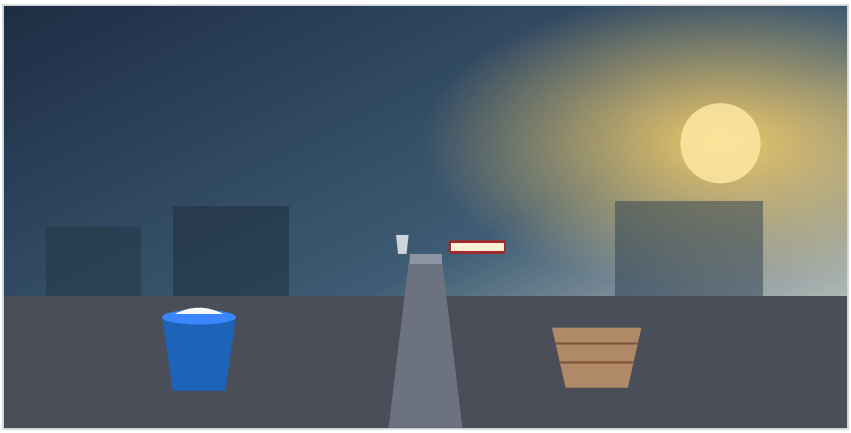
Chapter V Footsteps on the Concrete

> *"We often think of ghost stories as tales set in abandoned mansions or remote hill stations. Yet sometimes, the most haunting mysteries unfold right next door—on a sunlit terrace at seven in the morning, between two people sharing a cup of tea and a dream for a better future."*

CHAPTER I

Rooftop Dawn

7:00 AM — Near Kappalur Toll Plaza



The air near the Kappalur toll plaza never truly went quiet, even in the bruised purple hour before sunrise. From the second-floor window of his company-provided rental house, Anandhan Periasami could hear the low, persistent rumble of heavy freight trucks downshifting along the national highway access road. It was a vast change from the quiet agricultural village he had left behind, yet the modest concrete house tucked into a narrow residential lane offered the one thing his corporate salary could not buy: solitude.

At twenty-six, Anandhan was a newly appointed shift supervisor at a sprawling tech outsourcing campus in the industrial estate. The title sounded impressive to his relatives back home, though in reality it meant

eight relentless hours of managing call metrics, pacifying irate overseas clients, and absorbing pressure from upper management. To Anandhan, the corporate cubicle was only a temporary holding cell. His real life began at five-thirty every morning, hunched over a plastic folding table with thick stacks of state civil service examination guides, determined to secure a government administrative post.

Promptly at quarter to seven, Anandhan closed his polity textbook, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and walked into the small kitchen. He brewed a strong decoction of filter tea, sipping it black while scrubbing his previous day's office shirts in a plastic basin. Precision was his armor against exhaustion. By seven o'clock sharp, he was climbing the narrow concrete stairs to his rooftop terrace, carrying a blue plastic bucket filled with wrung-out laundry.

The morning air on the open terrace was crisp, carrying the faint, earthy scent of damp concrete and distant diesel smoke. Anandhan set the bucket down and began shaking out a crisp white shirt, clipping it onto the galvanized steel wire stretched between two iron poles.

A soft metallic scrape made him pause.

Six feet away, across the waist-high brick parapet separating his building from the adjacent two-story house, a slender young woman was stepping out onto her own terrace. She carried a weathered cane basket tucked against one hip and a thick, dog-eared general studies guidebook under her arm.

Anandhan stood still, holding a plastic clothespin mid-air. In the three days since moving into the lane, he had assumed the neighboring house

was empty. Its shutters were perpetually drawn, and no vehicles ever parked outside its rusted gate.

The woman set her basket down and looked up, catching his gaze. Instead of retreating in shyness, she offered a calm, composed smile. She wore a simple cotton salwar suit in a faded blue floral print, her long dark hair braided neatly down her back.

"Good morning," she said, her voice clear and unexpectedly warm against the distant hum of the highway. "You must be the new tenant."

"Good morning," Anandhan replied, blinking slightly before remembering his manners. He lowered the clothespin. "Yes. Anandhan. I shifted here on Monday for work at the industrial park."

"I am Rani. Rani Nachiar." She nodded toward the blue bucket at his feet, then at the ink stains on his fingers. "Washing clothes at seven in the morning and still carrying blue ink on your knuckles—either you are an accountant, or you are preparing for the Group One exams."

Anandhan let out a surprised laugh, the lingering stiffness of his early morning vanishing instantly. "Guilty on the second count. Though looking at the book under your arm, I think we are studying from the exact same syllabus."

Rani glanced down at the worn cover of her general studies manual and smiled brighter. "Indian Economy and Tamil Nadu Administration. I finished my post-graduation in Virudhunagar, and now my days belong entirely to these pages. It is rare to find someone in this industrial stretch who cares about public administration."

"Most people here just want to survive their shift," Anandhan agreed, stepping closer to his side of the parapet. He reached down to clip his shirt onto the wire, his movements suddenly lighter. "How long have you been preparing?"

"Long enough to know that discipline matters more than coaching institutes," Rani said, lifting a damp cotton dupatta from her basket and draping it over her clothesline with practiced, unhurried grace. "If you can master the morning hours before the world wakes up, half the battle is already won."

"That is exactly what I tell myself at five in the morning," Anandhan said, genuinely intrigued. Her tone carried none of the anxious desperation he usually saw in fellow aspirants at crowded library reading rooms. Instead, there was a serene certainty about her, as though she had already made peace with the long road ahead.

They spoke for ten minutes while hanging their laundry, trading notes on current affairs, the shifting weightage of history questions, and the grueling nature of preliminary exams. Anandhan found himself speaking more freely than he had in months. Living alone in a new city had begun to weigh on him, yet standing across the low brick wall from Rani felt effortlessly familiar, like catching up with an old classmate.

Down on the street below, the sharp, impatient blast of a horn echoed between the concrete walls. Anandhan glanced over the edge to see his company transport van idling at the mouth of the lane, its amber hazard lights blinking.

"That is my cue," Anandhan sighed, grabbing his empty bucket. "The corporate clock waits for no one. Thank you for the conversation, Rani. Same time tomorrow?"

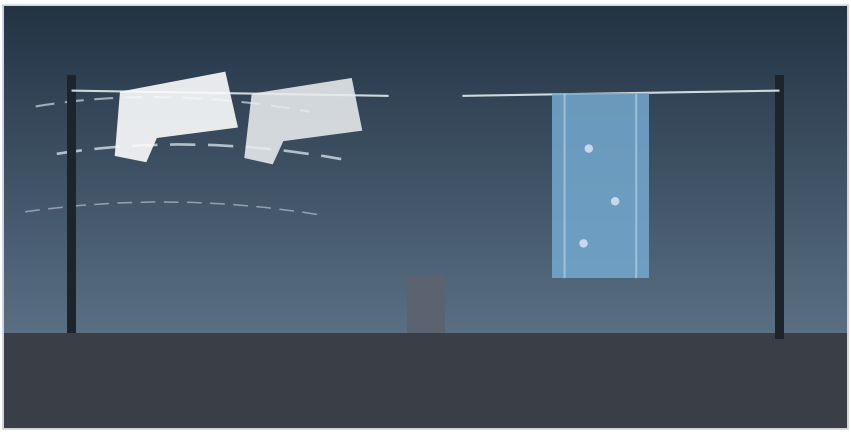
Rani looked at him, her dark eyes steady in the pale dawn light. "I am always here at seven, Anandhan."

Just then, the first golden rim of the rising sun cleared the eastern roofline, spilling bright, sharp light across the neighboring terrace. As Anandhan turned toward his stairs, he glanced back over his shoulder—only to see the neighboring rooftop already empty, Rani retreating silently into the dark mouth of her stairwell without once looking back.

CHAPTER II

The Laundry Line

Four Mornings Later — The Parapet Wall



Over the next four consecutive mornings, Anandhan needed no alarm clock to wake him. By six-fifty, his tea was finished, his shirts were rinsed, and he was standing on the second-floor terrace watching the eastern sky pale from indigo to slate gray.

Every single morning, precisely as the distant clock tower near Melur road chimed seven, Rani Nachiar emerged from her stairwell.

Their rooftop meetings quickly became the anchor of Anandhan’s day. At the Kappalur industrial estate office, his hours were swallowed by spreadsheets, escalation calls, and the suffocating hum of central air conditioning. On the terrace, however, the world felt wide and purposeful. Leaning against their respective sides of the parapet, they debated

constitutional amendments, dissected state budget allocations, and quizzed each other on obscure geographical landmarks.

Anandhan found himself increasingly drawn to Rani. She possessed a sharp, analytical mind paired with a gentle, understated humor that disarmed him completely. When he complained about his difficulty memorizing dry administrative dates, she offered clever mnemonic tricks. When he doubted whether a corporate supervisor could compete against full-time aspirants, she reminded him that real-world grit counted for more than rote memorization.

Yet, by the fourth morning, Anandhan's trained, analytical mind began registering small, discordant details that refused to fit together.

He first noticed it on Thursday while watching her pin a damp cloth to her wire. Rani was wearing the exact same faded blue floral salwar suit she had worn on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Even the items inside her cane basket—a plain white cotton towel, a pale yellow dupatta, and a folded blue saree—never seemed to change or dry.

Perhaps she owns duplicates, Anandhan reasoned silently, unwilling to sound intrusive. *Many aspirants keep simple, uniform wardrobes to save time.*

Still, another detail nagged at him. Around seven-fifteen, a brisk morning breeze swept across the open rooftops from the highway corridor, rattling Anandhan's metal bucket and whipping his freshly hung shirts horizontally against the wire. Anandhan shivered slightly in the cool gust—and froze.

Six feet away, Rani’s newly hung wet dupatta hung straight down, completely motionless. Not a single strand of her loose hair stirred in the wind.

Anandhan blinked, stepping closer to the edge. "Did you feel that chill? The wind off the highway is sharp today."

Rani tilted her head slightly, offering that same tranquil smile. "I suppose you get used to the weather when you stay in one place long enough."

The phrasing struck him as odd, though before he could dwell on it, she steered the conversation toward his upcoming mock test. Later that morning, while discussing exam centers in Virudhunagar, Anandhan mentioned the newly renovated government college auditorium near the old bus stand.

Rani frowned slightly. "Renovated? The old tiled roof hall beside the banyan tree? And the Sri Meenakshi coaching academy opposite the textile market—that is where most of us used to take weekend tests."

Anandhan paused, his brow furrowing. "Rani, that coaching center shut down years ago. They demolished the whole block to build a commercial complex before I even finished college."

For a fraction of a second, Rani’s expression flickered—a sudden, hollow stillness crossing her features, as if a curtain had briefly fallen behind her eyes. She looked down at the worn guidebook resting on the parapet wall.

"Time moves differently when your days look the same," she murmured softly. "Tell me about the new economic survey chapters you read last night."

Whenever Anandhan tried to ask about her family, her parents, or what she did during the afternoons, Rani deflected with effortless grace, turning the focus back onto him or onto ideals of public service.

That evening, Anandhan worked late clearing a backlog of shift reports, returning down the narrow lane past nine o’clock. As he unlocked his front gate, he looked up at the neighboring two-story house. Like every night before, it stood entirely submerged in heavy, suffocating darkness. No warm yellow glow bled through the wooden window slats; no sound of television, clattering dinner plates, or footsteps emerged from within. It looked less like a home and more like a sealed concrete monument.

CHAPTER III

The Corner Grocery

Saturday Afternoon — The Shaded Alleyway



Saturday brought a welcome break from the office, though Anandhan spent the entire morning locked inside his room wrestling with a three-hour mock examination paper. By two in the afternoon, his head throbbed from staring at dense columns of multiple-choice questions, and his tin of Assam tea leaves was completely empty.

Deciding that fresh air would clear his mind, Anandhan slipped on his sandals and walked out into the blazing afternoon sun. The quiet residential lane shimmered with heat waves rising off the asphalt. A hundred yards down, at the junction where the lane met the main feeder road, sat a cramped corner grocery shop shaded by a faded blue tarpaulin.

Inside, the shopkeeper was weighing out pulses on an old brass scale while a small table fan whirred noisily on the counter. Anandhan asked for tea leaves, sugar, and a packet of biscuits, leaning against a stack of rice sacks as the elderly vendor packed his items into a brown paper bag.

Glancing toward the bright rectangle of the open doorway, Anandhan’s breath caught.

Walking briskly past the edge of the shopfront was a slender young woman in a faded blue floral salwar suit, carrying a small cloth bag tucked close to her side.

"Rani?" Anandhan whispered under his breath.

A surge of genuine warmth rushed through him. For four days, he had only seen her framed by the gray light of dawn across a brick wall. Seeing her out in the neighborhood in broad daylight suddenly erased every lingering, irrational unease he had felt the night before. She was real, living just next door, running afternoon errands just like him.

"Keep the change, Anna," Anandhan said hurriedly, slapping a hundred-rupee note onto the counter. He snatched his paper parcel and stepped out onto the sun-baked street.

Thirty paces ahead, Rani was turning into the narrow residential alleyway that led back toward their houses. She moved with rapid, remarkably silent steps, keeping close to the shaded compound walls without once glancing around.

"Rani!" Anandhan called out, quickening his pace.

His voice sounded strangely flat, swallowed almost immediately by the heavy, breathless afternoon heat. Ahead of him, Rani did not slow down or turn her head.

"Rani, wait up!" he called louder, jogging a few steps down the empty lane. Not a single neighbor stood on the verandas; the entire street seemed deserted in the midday glare.

Anandhan rounded the final bend just in time to see the rusted iron gate of the neighboring house swing gently inward on its hinges, clinking softly against the stone pillar as though someone had just slipped through.

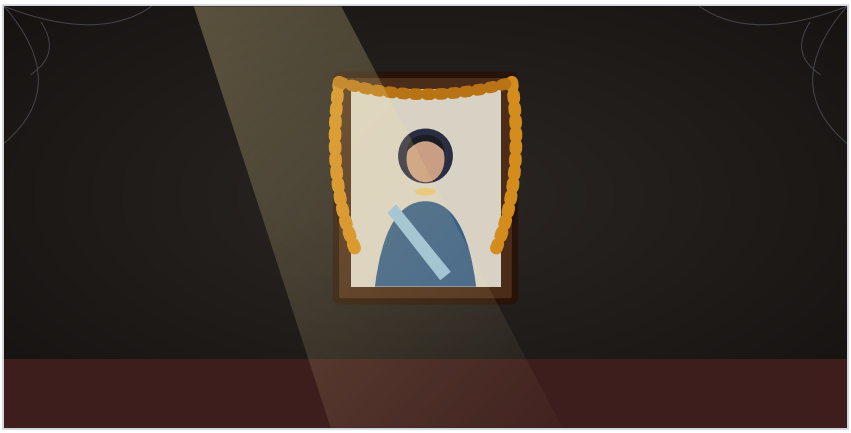
Smiling to himself at how fast she walked, Anandhan approached the open gate. For the first time, he stepped onto her property, walking up the short, leaf-strewn path toward the covered concrete veranda. Seeing her family in person would finally give him the chance to introduce himself properly as a neighbor—and perhaps share notes without shouting across a terrace wall.

He reached the edge of the veranda. The heavy teakwood front door stood slightly ajar, leaving a narrow vertical gap that opened directly into the dim, shadowed interior of the front living hall.

CHAPTER IV

The Garlanded Frame

The Threshold — Five Years Cold



Anandhan stepped onto the dusty concrete veranda, raising his knuckles to knock politely on the wooden door frame. Before his hand touched the wood, his eyes adjusted to the dim light spilling through the open gap into the front hall.

His arm froze mid-air. The paper bag of groceries slipped from his numb fingers, hitting the veranda floor with a dull thud.

The living room inside was completely barren. There were no sofas, no wooden chairs, no woven mats, and no signs of a lived-in household. Thick gray cobwebs hung like tattered curtains from the ceiling corners, and an undisturbed blanket of pale dust coated the red oxide floor.

Mounted directly in the center of the far wall, illuminated by a single shaft of dusty sunlight slanting through a broken louver, hung a large, ornate wooden picture frame.

Inside the glass stared Rani Nachiar.

She was wearing the exact same faded blue floral salwar suit, looking straight into the camera with her calm, gentle smile. Draped across the top of the frame was a brittle, dried garland of yellow marigolds, and two faded smudges of dried sandalwood paste marked the glass just beneath her chin.

The unmistakable, sacred markers of a memorial portrait turned the blood in Anandhan’s veins to ice. His chest constricted so violently he forgot how to breathe.

"What do you think you are doing standing on that porch, boy?"

A harsh, gravelly voice shattered the dead silence behind him. Anandhan spun around, nearly losing his balance on the edge of the step.

Seated on a low stone bench beneath the sprawling shade of an old neem tree across the lane was an elderly woman. Her silver hair was tied into a tight, severe knot, and her deeply lined face watched him with sharp, suspicious eyes.

"I—I was..." Anandhan stammered, his throat bone-dry as he pointed a trembling finger toward the open doorway. "The girl... Rani. I just saw her walk in here from the street corner. I wanted to speak with her."

The old woman, Aaachi Ammal, stared at him for a long, heavy moment. Slowly, the suspicion in her weathered face gave way to a look of grim, unsettling pity.

"Come away from that threshold," Aaachi Ammal ordered quietly, gesturing with her chin. "Do not stand in the shadow of a grief-stricken house."

Mechanically, Anandhan walked down the steps and stopped near the neem tree, his heart hammering painfully against his ribs. "Who lives here? Why is her photo hung like that?"

Aaachi Ammal sighed, shaking her silver head as she looked back at the shuttered two-story building. "Nobody has lived inside those walls for five years, son. That is the house of Master Sivakumar and his wife. That girl in the frame was their only daughter, Rani."

"Five years?" Anandhan whispered, a cold sweat breaking out across his forehead. "No, that is impossible. I spoke to her on the terrace this morning. At seven o'clock. Every morning this week—"

"Do not repeat such things out loud," Aaachi Ammal interrupted sharply, tapping her wooden cane against the ground. "Rani Nachiar was a brilliant girl. Studied night and day to become a government officer. Five years ago, during the monsoon month, she was returning home late from an evening coaching class near the Virudhunagar highway junction."

The old woman’s voice dropped to a bitter, sorrowful rasp. "A gang of drunken boys from the highway stretch cornered her near the culvert. They dragged her into the bushes, assaulted her, and left her broken on the stones

so she could not identify their faces. By the time a lorry driver found her at dawn, she was already gone."

Anandhan staggered back a step, gripping the rough bark of the neem tree to keep his knees from buckling. Every word struck him like a physical blow—the closed coaching center in Virudhunagar, the stillness of her hair in the wind, the unchanged wet clothes on her line, the suffocating darkness of the house every night.

"Her parents broke completely after the funeral," Aachi Ammal continued softly, staring at the rusted iron gate. "Her mother could not bear to look at the stairs her daughter climbed every morning to study. Within a month, they locked the doors, left the garland on her portrait, and moved away to their native village near Tirunelveli. Not a soul has opened that gate since."

Anandhan turned slowly back toward the house. Through the narrow crack of the front door, Rani’s portrait stared silently back at him through the dust.

CHAPTER V

Footsteps on the Concrete

6:58 AM — The Rooftop Stairwell

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Dazed by a wave of horrifying shock and suffocating grief, Anandhan stumbled back into his own rental house, bolting the heavy iron door behind him with trembling hands. Leaving his groceries abandoned on the neighbor's veranda, he climbed the stairs to his room and collapsed onto the edge of his cot, burying his face in his palms.

His mind raced frantically, trying to assemble a rational explanation. Sleep deprivation from his early study schedule. The isolation of a new city. Stress from his corporate target reviews. *I imagined her,* he told himself desperately, gripping his hair. *I saw her photo through a window when I moved in, and my tired brain built a conversation out of loneliness.*

Yet no amount of logic could erase the sound of her voice reciting constitutional articles, or the warmth of her smile as the morning light struck the parapet.

He did not open his books that evening. He did not eat dinner. As night fell over the Kappalur lane, Anandhan sat rigidly on a plastic chair in the dark, listening to the distant roar of highway trucks and watching the clock on his wall tick relentlessly toward midnight.

Eventually, exhaustion pulled him into a shallow, feverish sleep sitting upright in his chair.

He woke with a violent start. Pale gray light was filtering through the slats of his bedroom window. Instinctively, Anandhan's eyes snapped to the wall clock.

Six-fifty-eight.

His breath shallowed. Silence hung thick and heavy over the house. *It was a hallucination,* he repeated silently, his fingers digging into the armrests of the chair. *Nothing is out there. The house next door has been empty for five years.*

Then, from directly above his ceiling, came a sound he knew better than his own heartbeat.

Thud. The soft set-down of a cane basket on concrete.

Followed by the sharp, unmistakable *snap* of wet cotton cloth being shaken out in the morning air.

Anandhan went completely rigid. Cold terror crawled up his spine, locking every muscle in his body. Slowly, forcing himself to breathe quietly, he stood up and walked out of his bedroom into the narrow corridor leading to the rooftop stairwell.

The wooden door at the top of the stairs stood half-open, framing a square of pale dawn sky.

Step by agonizing step, Anandhan climbed the concrete stairs. His palm pressed against the cool plaster wall for support as his eyes rose level with the rooftop floor.

Across the six-foot divide of the brick parapet stood Rani Nachiar.

She was wearing the faded blue floral salwar suit. Her damp dupatta hung motionless from the wire beside her, and her worn general studies guidebook rested neatly on the top edge of the brick wall.

Hearing his footsteps on the stairs, Rani turned slowly toward him. The serene, composed smile she had worn all week was gone. In its place was an expression of profound, heartbreaking sorrow, her dark eyes glistening in the gray light before sunrise.

She did not vanish. She did not step back into the shadows. Instead, she placed one slender hand over the worn pages of her book on the parapet wall and looked straight at him.

"You went inside the house, didn't you, Anandhan?" she whispered, her voice carrying clearly across the stillness. "Now you know why I never leave the roof."

✽ TO BE CONTINUED ✽

The Ghost Across the Parapet
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