

I woke up on a floor that wasn't mine.

The ground beneath me was cold and hard, like concrete, and it pressed into my cheek as if it wanted to leave a mark.

I didn't open my eyes at first because I thought maybe if I just stayed still, I would recognize something—the hum of my fan, the distant sound of cars outside my window, my mom clattering dishes in the kitchen.

But there was nothing.

No hum. No voices. Just a faint buzzing that seemed to be coming from inside my own head.

When I finally opened my eyes, the ceiling above me was gray and cracked, like dried skin.

A single light bulb hung down on a wire, swaying slightly even though there was no breeze.

I sat up too fast and the room tilted.

The walls were bare concrete. No windows. One metal door. No handle on my side.

I told myself this had to be a dream.

I pinched my arm. It hurt.

I stood up, my legs shaking, and called out, "Hello?"

My voice echoed back at me in a way that didn't sound like mine.

It sounded thinner. Afraid.

The air smelled damp, like something had been rotting there for a long time.

I tried to remember the last thing I did before this.

I was in my bed.

I remember scrolling on my phone.

I remember feeling tired.

That's it.

There's nothing after that.

It's like someone cut the film of my life and burned the rest.

I walked to the door and pounded on it with both fists.

The sound was dull, swallowed by the thick metal.

"Let me out!" I screamed, but the words felt weak, like they dissolved before they could mean anything.

I pressed my ear against the door.

Nothing.

No footsteps. No breathing.

Just silence that felt heavy and thick.

I stepped back and looked around the room more carefully.

In one corner there was a small mattress without sheets.

In another, a metal bucket.

I didn't want to think about what that was for.

The light bulb flickered once, and my heart nearly stopped.

I started pacing, counting my steps from one wall to the other.

Eight steps across. Ten steps lengthwise.

I did it again.

Eight. Ten. Eight. Ten.

I kept counting because it gave my brain something to hold onto.

If I stopped counting, I felt like I would float away.

"This isn't real," I whispered.

But if it wasn't real, why could I feel the roughness of the wall under my fingers?

Why could I feel my pulse racing in my throat?

I tried to remember if I had made someone mad.

If I had gotten into someone's car.

If I had walked somewhere alone.

My thoughts felt slippery, like trying to grab a fish with bare hands.

Every time I almost remembered something, it darted away.

The buzzing in my head got louder.

I covered my ears, but it didn't stop.

It wasn't outside.

It was me.

Hours passed.

Or maybe minutes.

There was no clock.

The light never changed.

I sat on the mattress and stared at the walls until shapes started forming in the cracks.

At first it was just random lines, but then I saw faces.

A pair of eyes here. A mouth there.

I blinked hard and they disappeared.

I laughed, but the sound came out wrong—too high, almost hysterical.

"Get it together," I told myself.

"You're not crazy."

But the word crazy echoed in my head like someone else had said it.

I stood up again and examined the door.

There had to be something.

A weakness.

A loose hinge.

I ran my fingers along the edges until one of my nails split and I felt a sting.

I didn't even realize I was bleeding until I saw the thin red line.

I pressed my forehead against the door and tried to think logically.

Someone put me here.

That means someone can let me out.

But why haven't they come?

Are they watching me?

I looked up at the corners of the ceiling, searching for a camera.

I thought I saw a tiny black dot near the light bulb.

My stomach twisted.

"Are you there?" I whispered, staring at it.

The bulb flickered again, and I stumbled back.

I started talking then, just to fill the silence.

I told the walls about my house, about my favorite cereal, about my dog.

Maybe I thought if I kept speaking, I would stay myself.

At some point I must have slept, because I woke up on the mattress with a jolt, convinced someone had called my name.

"Maya."

The sound was clear in my head.

Too clear.

I sat up and listened.

Nothing.

My heart was beating so hard I thought it might crack my ribs.

“You’re imagining things,” I said out loud.

But then I heard it again, softer this time, like a breath against my ear.

“Maya.”

I scrambled away from the wall, pressing myself into the opposite corner.

“Stop,” I whispered.

“Please stop.”

Tears blurred my vision.

I tried to remember my mom’s face, but it kept shifting, her eyes moving too far apart, her smile stretching unnaturally wide.

I squeezed my eyes shut and dug my nails into my arms until the pain felt sharper than the fear.

“Think,” I ordered myself.

“There has to be a way out.”

I stood up and forced myself to inspect every inch of the room again.

That’s when I noticed something different.

On the wall behind the mattress, there were scratches.

Faint, but there.

Long vertical lines, like someone had dragged something sharp against the concrete.

My chest tightened.

I hadn’t made those.

Which meant someone else had been here.

I traced the scratches with my finger, and for a second, I felt like I could hear breathing that wasn’t mine.

The scratches weren’t random.

I counted them.

Five lines grouped together.

Then a space.

Then five more.

Tally marks.

Someone had been counting days.

Or attempts.

Or something worse.

My stomach churned.

I started laughing again, but this time I couldn't stop.

The sound bounced off the walls and came back at me louder, mocking.

"This isn't funny," I gasped, clutching my sides.

I pressed my hands over my mouth, but the laughter kept spilling out between my fingers.

I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor, staring at the tally marks.

If someone else had been here, what happened to them?

Did they escape?

Or did they just... stop?

The buzzing in my head turned into whispers.

I couldn't make out words, just a constant murmur like a crowd talking behind a closed door.

I stood up suddenly, furious.

"I'm not staying here!" I shouted at the walls, at the door, at whoever might be listening.

I grabbed the metal bucket and hurled it at the door with all my strength.

The crash rang through the room, and for a moment, there was silence.

Then I heard it.

A click.

I froze.

The door handle—there was a handle now—slowly turned from the outside.

This was it.

This was my chance.

Or my end.

The door creaked open just an inch, enough for a sliver of darkness to slip inside.

I waited to see a face, a hand, anything.

But there was nothing.

Just the hallway beyond, dim and empty.

The handle wasn't moving anymore.

It was just... open.

I stared at it, afraid it would disappear if I blinked.

"This isn't real," I whispered again, but my legs were already moving.

I stepped toward the door slowly, like approaching a wild animal.

When I reached the door, I hesitated.

What if this is another trick?

What if the hallway leads to another room just like this one?

The whispers in my head grew louder, overlapping until I couldn't tell where one ended and another began.

"Go," one of them said.

"Stay," another warned.

I pressed my hands against my temples and screamed until my throat burned.

Then, before I could change my mind, I shoved the door open and stumbled into the hallway.

The light inside the room flickered violently behind me.

I turned back for just a second.

The room looked smaller somehow, like it had shrunk.

The scratches on the wall were gone.

The mattress was gone.

It was just an empty concrete box.

My box.

I didn't remember walking into that room in the first place.

I didn't remember a door closing.

I didn't remember anything before waking up on that floor.

The hallway stretched endlessly in both directions, fading into darkness.

I took one step forward, then another, my reflection flickering in the shiny walls.

But it wasn't matching my movements exactly.

It was a second too slow.

I stopped walking.

My reflection kept going.

And that's when I understood that maybe I hadn't escaped at all.

Maybe the room was never the prison.

Maybe I was.