

### "Three or Four"

Mum folds napkins with trembling hands,  
creases sharp, symmetrical.  
At the doorway,  
I hover—  
three plates or four?  
The question snags in my throat,  
light as dust.

You rinse a clean dish,  
watching the sink fill,  
your mouth a thin, unbroken line.  
"Four," you say,  
but your voice doesn't reach me.

At eight,  
I stack the plates with careful hands,  
balancing hope on porcelain edges.  
Each clink a prayer—  
for the door to open,  
for the keys to jangle,  
for his laugh to fill the corners  
that ache hollow without him.

At nine,  
the house hums at dinner with a static loneliness.  
I place his plate anyway,  
watching it stay empty,  
watching Mum serve the silence,  
watching my sister draw galaxies in her mashed potatoes.  
We don't speak of absence—  
we just set a place for it.

At eleven,  
I open the cupboard,  
three plates slide easily into my hands.  
The fourth stares back from the shelf,  
tilted sideways,  
waiting.  
Mum cuts carrots into coins so thin  
they disappear between her fingers.  
I don't ask anymore.  
But every night,  
I leave a little space at the table.  
Room for a miracle.

Room for a lie.

Twelve —  
our life folds into boxes.  
The smell of bleach and broken promises  
cling to the walls.  
In other people's houses,  
I set the table on laminate benches,  
forks too light,  
glasses too cracked.  
Three plates.  
Always three.  
The fourth is memory now,  
stacked carefully away.

At thirteen,  
we learn how to disappear.  
Hotel rooms, borrowed couches,  
stale bread dinners  
eaten cross-legged on threadbare carpet.  
Mum says we're free now.  
She says it in a voice that forgets how to believe it.

Fourteen,  
a man with kind eyes moves in.  
He keeps his shoes by the door,  
his voice low,  
like he's afraid to wake the ghosts.  
I set three plates.  
Always three.  
He brings wine.  
Mum laughs, too loud, too long,  
as if trying to find the sound of herself again.

At fifteen,  
the table disappears.  
Mum's chair stays empty most nights.  
I peel apples at the sink,  
watch the slices brown in the air  
before anyone notices.  
My sister eats out.  
I chew old bread  
into smaller and smaller pieces  
until the hunger feels manageable.

Sixteen —

the cupboard door sags on broken hinges.  
Three plates left now,  
stacked like a reminder.  
I eat noodles standing over the sink,  
listening to the house breathe.  
Some nights,  
I set a place just for the silence.

Seventeen,  
he leaves her.  
She leaves us.  
No slammed door,  
no goodbye—  
just the absence,  
settling heavy on the windowsills.

I move in with him—  
the man we once set four plates for,  
the man who once loved us in the tense of “was.”

In the cupboard,  
three plates wait.  
One for me.  
One for my sister.  
One for the version of Mum  
who used to wait too.

The fourth stays buried in the back,  
dust collecting on its certainty.

Mum,  
did we ever need four plates—  
or did I just keep setting them,  
waiting for someone  
who forgot they had a seat?