

I met five-year-old me for brunch today.

She was 10 minutes late. I was 20 minutes early.

She arrived in a blur of untamed movement—shoelaces trailing, hair dangling haphazardly, gripping a storybook worn soft by time and love. She climbed into the chair across from me, eyes full of wonder, staring at me as if I were a constellation she couldn't quite name.

She ordered hot chocolate and a rainbow M&M cookie. I ordered water.

The silence stretched between us, trembling at the edges, like the pause between lightning and thunder.

"You look older," she finally said, a whisper laced with curiosity. Then she frowned. "But you don't look like a grown-up."

I smiled. "What does a grown-up look like?"

She stirred her drink, watching the whirlpool of melted chocolate. "Someone who forgets how to laugh. Someone who loses their favourite things and never tries to find them again."

I exhaled.

Had I forgotten?

Once, I lived in golden hours and backyard symphonies, spinning barefoot beneath a ceiling of sky, in laughter that cracked open the world like an egg spilling light. I believed in fairy tales and kindness—that love, once given, would never slip away.

But time had rough edges. It stole things without warning. It unraveled dreams like loose thread, left gaps where people used to be, pressed responsibility into my palms like stones that never got lighter.

She kicked her feet, watching me. "Do we still laugh a lot?"

I thought of the places where joy had lingered, where it pressed its fingers into the folds of my life—the nights spent breathless with laughter, the friendships that held me through the storms, the music that made me feel whole, even on the days I didn't recognise myself.

"Yeah," I said, softly. "We still laugh a lot."

She grinned, like I had just handed her a sunrise.

Then, carefully, she placed *The Giving Tree* on the table, smoothing the cover with reverence. The green was muted now, like leaves surrendering to autumn, its spine bowed under the weight of countless hands, countless years.

"Do we still have this?"

I flinched.

That book—it was a heartbeat in my childhood, a secret I cradled in my arms like something fragile and sacred. The way its pages whispered in the hush of blanket forts, the way the tree gave and gave, roots tangled in sacrifice, branches aching with devotion. I had scribbled my name in the margins once, claiming it as mine. But did I understand then? Did I see the sorrow behind the giving, the hollowness left behind when all that was offered had been taken?

Now, tracing the worn edges with my fingertips, I felt its weight anew—not just paper and ink, but memories, lessons, regret. I had spent a lifetime taking. Had I ever truly given?

And I remembered the day it vanished—left behind somewhere, forgotten in the chaos of growing up, lost before I learned what it meant to hold onto things that mattered.

Her small hands trembled over the cover, waiting for my answer.

"You still have it," I lied.

Her face lit up, eyes bright with the kind of trust only children have—trust in stories, in people, in the idea that some things never leave you.

And maybe, in some way, she was right.

She slid off her chair, brushing crumbs from her lap.

Before leaving, she paused.

She looked at me—really looked at me—like she was searching for the pieces of herself inside my bones, as if checking that I had not misplaced her entirely.

Then, gently, with a quiet sort of certainty, she said:

"I think I'm gonna like growing up."

The air tightened.

The moment curled around me like a familiar melody, like laughter echoing in an empty room, like something beautiful that lingers even after it's gone.

And this time, I believed her.

I watched her walk away, skipping, laughing, her book hugged tightly to her chest.

And suddenly—I wanted to spin barefoot in the kitchen again.