

Ethan's eyes burned as he stared at the ceiling in the dark. It was past midnight, yet his mind churned with lines of code, bug reports, and deadlines. He could hear the faint hum of his laptop from across the room, the machine sleeping—but his brain never did.

He wasn't in the office. He wasn't even near his desk. But he might as well have been shackled there. Every time he tried to drift into sleep, a stray thought would pierce through: Did I fix that memory leak? What if the deployment fails tomorrow?

On weekends, when his daughter tugged at his sleeve to play, his body was present, but his mind wandered back to sprint boards and review notes. He'd nod and smile, but she could tell he wasn't really there. The guilt would come, heavy and sharp, but instead of freeing him, it only chained him tighter.

Work lived in him like a warden. No one forced him to think about it—not his boss, not his colleagues. The prison wasn't physical. It was a cage built from expectation, ambition, and fear. A cage he carried with him everywhere.

Sometimes, he wondered what silence would feel like. Not the silence of a muted Slack notification, but real silence—the kind that let you hear your own heartbeat without worry pressing against it.

One evening, walking home, he noticed a sparrow land on a fence. It hopped, light and unbothered, and then flew off. He stopped in his tracks, watching it disappear into the sky. For a fleeting second, he envied the bird's freedom, a freedom he had once believed was his by right.

And in that second, he realized: the keys to his cell weren't held by his company, or his laptop, or even the endless tasks. They were in his own pocket, hidden beneath the weight of his own unwillingness to set them down.