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**“Frozen Thoughts”**

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‘So that’s it then. You have twenty four hours. May all that favour you is good fortune’, were the words that came out of the little man’s narrow mouth as he walked back into the void where he came from and just stopped being visible. I reckon I’d get to meet him again once the time’s up. In life, we often encounter certain thoughts that are untouchables. When we grow up noticing the people we love, respect, look up to; seemingly never entertain an idea, we ourselves quite unknowingly, render an air of indifference to that concept. Although there are many such concepts, there is one which is easily more important than any of the others. That concept is death. Sure, we all know that death is imminent, but it seldom makes an appearance in the thinking space of our minds. We know we die one day, we know it’s not tomorrow, consequently it’s not important enough to think about. That is why when death really visits us, it’s more surprising than saddening. It was just past eleven, I was tired and youtube didn’t offer any titillating new material to convince me to strain my eyes further. So I decided to go to bed and switched off the light. Call it a premonition or a self induced illusion to amuse myself, but the darkness felt peculiar. As if someone was hiding in it and observing me, just two steps perennially away from my peripheral vision. He materialized from nothingness behind him and slowly walked towards me. I was sleeping and at the same time I am watching him. No one needs to tell me that it wasn’t an illusion; I knew I was not dreaming. I learned that day that contrary to what we were generally led to assume, death is not sudden or lonely or something no one can see in advance. In fact there is a cosmic bureaucracy involved in the whole process of dying. It kick starts one day prior to your death and you will know about it from the informant, your guide. The guy assigned to me was dwarfishly short, had a round nose, pointed ears and

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intense concerned eyes. He looked like a mickey mouse with elf ears whose parents just got divorced. I asked him who he was, he told me that I can perceive him as anything I wish to; an angel, a nymph, a deva or a fravashi, depending upon my preferences of ethnicity, but assured me that I lack the ability to understand who he really was, even if he cared to elaborate. The way he spoke, like every little thing about him, is strange and difficult to follow. 'Who I am, does not matter. It matters why I am here', he said in his deep somber tone, 'Your time is finally upon you. The next twenty four hours mark your last on this realm. It is time that you shun this form, it's ways and embark on a conscientious new journey', he paused as if expecting a reaction from me. I couldn't say what he anticipated but I can say that I did not deliver on his expectations. He continued, almost disappointedly, deepening his tone as if urging me to grasp the gravitas. 'Fear not, for I am charged to help you with the transition and help you is what I will do. First of all, allow me to edify your benighted senses about the 'Three Desires' and their significance thereon', he continued for so long and so boringly that he succeeded in eliciting a yawn from me. It was particularly impressive considering that I am actually asleep. Interdimensional interactions can be funny that way. What he said was essentially this, there are thousands of desires in every heart, but of all them, some are considered intense and passionate enough to keep you awake at night if you give them their due share of thought. The reason I am being notified about my death one day in advance is that I have to spend that last day fulfilling at least three of those mortal desires. 'Failing to which you doom yourself to roam this very realm for aeons, without shape or form. The most dreadful penance anyone in any realm can go through', he said with a particular shade of sinister added in his tone to intimidate me. The tone achieved its purpose. I was suddenly afraid, as if only then I understood what he was telling me. I am dying in twenty four hours. 'There is no need for gratuitous alarm', he said contradicting his own tone, 'for I have good news. Yours is a circumstance I call fortunate. You have in your possession, a total of twenty one mortal desires to choose from, a rather healthy number of choices'. I asked him what those choices were, he simply shook his head as if I had offended him. 'I am merely assigned to point out the direction. It is your quest, you are the one bestowed with the burden and you

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are the one who receives its fruits, should you succeed' I gave it a moment's thought. I have to fulfill three of my desires and I have twenty one to choose from. Although I did not specifically know what those twenty one exactly are, it didn't seem like a particularly daunting task. 'Is there anything you wish to ask of me?', he asked expectantly. I thought about it for a moment. He seemed happy that I was thinking. 'Say, if I eat too much tomorrow, will there be any chance of me suffering from the after effects in the subsequent form that you say I will take, like indigestion or gastric troubles' He looked like one of those bank employees, who are so well versed with their daily activities that if you ask them a doubt they'd jeer at you with a contemptuous look. And even he was surprised with my doubt, probably no one ever raised that concern before. But if you think about it for a moment you will understand how genuine and relevant that concern is, considering it is my last day, there is a very good chance of me eating a lot. 'I'd have to say no', he said with a budding contempt which increased as he observed the satisfaction on my face expand. 'I take it that you will assume my significance. I am here to counsel you, to dispel your fears, to fend off unnecessary thoughts', he said stressing each word. He wanted me to ask important questions. 'Oh! Can you tell me where we'll be going once I'm done here?' 'No' 'Or what happens to me after I die?' 'No' 'Can you tell me how I am going to die' 'No' 'Do you know what #YOLO means?' 'I have to say no', 'Do you agree that all these are important questions?' 'Except for the one with the weird word, yes' 'Do you see why I didn't want to ask them?' 'Almost', he said with contempt now transforming into fully flamed hatred. I then realized that if he is my psycho-pomp and if we are destined to spend time together, then we are staring at a lot of uncomfortable silences. He recapped the entire meeting to make sure I got everything. He told me, with added stress, not to even remotely entertain the thought of telling this to anyone because then all the rules will be void, I will be dead and damned immediately. He then disappeared wishing me luck. Thus, started my last day on the tiny rock called Earth. \*\*\*\*\* Agree or not, one of the most important aspects of our lives is the zeal to know (in some cases control) what others think about us. For many, this is the major driving force of life. Hence my decision to ask my friends, what they think my burning desires can be, hardly needs explanation. Their

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opinions exceeded my expectations. They ranged from backpacking through Europe, learning to paint and to play a music instrument, becoming a person whose name is all the introduction he needs, fighting corruption within my limits as a young journalist etc.,. People did understand me more than I gave them credit for. I had most of those desires in my mind. But none of them can be achieved in the ambitious limit of one day. Staring at your mortality changes your perception a lot. At this moment no one else mattered but me. I realized how close wisdom and selfishness are and why they are often confused for each other. I was imparting some of this newly found wisdom on my colleagues when I was called into the copy editor's office. Now, the only reason I went to the office that day was because it is the place where one of my three desires can be fulfilled. I didn't plan to linger and had it been anyone else that requested my presence, I would have left without even giving the request a second thought. But our copy editor is a strange, interesting man. He talks like his words are golden and smiles like his smiles can be stolen. No one in the office has the privilege of referring to him as a friend. He is very hard working, not just by the standards of senior staff. My personal relationship with the copy editor is very professional. We achieved an ideal standpoint where neither of us expect anything from the other except what the newspaper expects of us. As long as I knew him he was a calm person, not letting anything around him affect him. But that day something was different. His brows were twisted in never before seen waves, his eyes never rested on any object for more than a few seconds. He was not pacing up and down his office, but the desire to do so is apparent in the creases on his face and the shiver in his limbs. Whatever he wanted to discuss with me, it was very important and it was not something you discuss often. 'I see you are talking to everyone about your ultimate goals in life', he said, rubbing the sweat off his palms. I nodded. 'Why?', he asked tentatively but with heightened curiosity. His eyes stared at me doubtfully. 'Do you know something?', they asked. 'No, do you?', my eyes replied. But our lips were rigid, no audible words were exchanged in the conversation. To a foreign eye, our interaction will seem like our regular ones, but only we two know that the silence here is filled with the words that want to be spoken but cannot. He breathed out a deep resigning sigh and asked me about an article I wrote a couple of years

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ago. It was about a government school teacher who lost both his hands in an accident. He later learned to paint using his lips. I wrote the article for sponsors to help him sell his art. Unsurprisingly not many donations were received. 'Are you in touch with him?' I shook my head. 'Do you have an address or something?' 'I have an old address, but I don't know if he still stays there'. The expression on his face looked as if some invisible hand slapped him hard and he is doing his best to subdue his pain. 'Is there any way I can contact him', he said in a pleading tone. 'I know a guy who might know where he is', I said, 'but I don't have his phone number. I have to visit him personally'. I naturally assumed that he would now explain the quandary he is in or ask me to help him find the man. But he asked something that knocked the words, senses and my newly found wisdom out of me. 'What is your deadline?'. He didn't have to clarify on which deadline he's talking about. An image of three and a half foot imp flashed before my eyes and managed to be extremely scary. I think my diffidence is well founded and my silence justified. I did not want to spend an eternity roaming aimlessly and watching as the lives of other people pass by. Even thinking about it juddered my bones. 'Mine is nine thirty tonight', he said, now that all that's bothering him has come out and found asylum in my mind, he seemed relatively calm. Me on the other hand couldn't comprehend what's happening around me and even the ticking clock sounded like its only purpose of existence is to annoy me. 'You are not supposed to discuss that', I whispered, as if whispering would help. 'We are not supposed to discuss with the people who don't know. But I can see that you already know the rules' His expression was difficult to read, it was a motley mixture of heart churning emotions. There was pain and sorrow, then a tough sense of urgency, compassion and pity made a brief appearance. I suppose they are for me. Amidst all these there is a delicately minuscule but surely discernable relief, that he is not alone in all this, that he has found a compatriot to share the anguish of his last moments. He insisted that he was awake when his guide made her appearance. He was finishing his work with the cover story for the weekend magazine. The encounter was in stark contrast with mine. His guide was gentle when she broke the news to him and waited for a while as the news made its way through to the core of his heart. He collapsed when it did, after many years, tears formed in his eyes and

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broke his heart as they left their abode. Surprisingly, they did not take any amount of pain with them as they jumped off his chin. She stood by him throughout his breakdown, not making any patronizing remarks. He asked her what would happen to his family, if he would get to know anything about them once he is on the other side, is there anything he could do to extend or postpone this fate. I admit that I was a little surprised when I heard his last question. Why have I not thought of that! Looking at his plight, his guide told him that someone he knew well is also dying the next day. And when he saw me today, he knew at once that it was me. 'I will help you find him. We may have to hurry, it will take some time to search' 'But', he said in a faint protest, 'I can't keep you from your work, I am sure you have your own things to do'. By things he meant my 'three desires' which I am supposed to fulfill. 'I am done with mine', I said casually and his mouth opened like a pothole in a rainy season. \*\*\*\*\* We were gliding down in his car. The midday traffic wasn't heavy, but kept us from achieving the ideal pace we would like. His gripping tension reflected in many ways, scurrying eyes, tapping fingers, shivering legs and quivering lips. His deadline is more than an hour earlier than mine. I have fulfilled all my quota of three desires and he is yet to open his account. 'You slept!!', I screamed in surprise. He glanced back and forth a couple of times, hung his head in something akin to shame. 'Each person reacts differently to stress', he said, explaining himself. 'Still, you found out that this is your last day and you found time to sleep?' 'It's not that...it's...just, I was really tired and I didn't do it on purpose, it just happened' I shook my head in mock disappointment. In its own bleak way, I found that funny. A grown man the age of my father, trying to find an excuse for why he fell asleep after a trying day. He on the other hand was worried at the ease with which I had approached the whole fulfilling your desires thing. Come to think of it, I really was good at it. First, the stock market, an indomitable hydra that always held a fascination in me. It's like playing chess, just instead of one opponent you have thousands. The calculations, anticipations, the foreboding, the entire process has an addictive pleasure to it. I used to follow the business sections, attend seminars and training sessions whenever I could. I did a lot of research on my own, but never dared to venture in and buy a real share. My father once lost, what can be conveniently called a hefty amount,

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investing in the market. Now, I know what his mistakes were and how I can avoid them along with several others. Still I couldn't muster enough courage to step past the inhibitions formed in those early years. I satisfied myself by doing the next best thing, investing in mock apps. They do track the real market, but instead of spending money and buying the actual stocks, you get to invest using mock money and witness what your investment would have returned. It was supposed to be an exercise, an act precluding the actual thing. But all the mock profit I earned was never enough to stop my fingers from shivering when I was about to make a real trade. Last night, using all my hitherto unused expertise, I made a list of ten equity stocks with cheerful prospects. I bought them the moment markets opened this morning. Second. When I was a kid, I had an argument with a friend, who was very cynical for his age. It was his opinion that there is no such thing as a selfless deed, everything we do is either for some gain in return, or personal gratification, or for plain vanity. I, being the optimistic snob I was, naturally disagreed and had a strong impulse to prove him wrong. Years later, I forgot all about the argument, but that impulse lingered and transformed itself into a desire. I want to help a complete stranger, expecting nothing in return, a help just because they deserve it. My constrictions were not as stringent as that of my former friend's. If I get a little personal gratification in the process, I'd still count it as selfless. Turns out, it was really difficult to find a deed that is big enough to be termed as a "help" and yet wouldn't make the beneficiary obligated to you. Few months ago I found one. I was dining in a small restaurant, the food was delectable, the ambience amicable, the treatment impeccable, yet the place was as empty as a desert on the hottest day of the year. I inquired about the chef, who turned out to be the owner. He was from a small town, came to the city with a haunting passion, against everyone's advice. A small discussion with him revealed that he knew a lot about cooking but nothing about marketing. So I wrote a review for his restaurant in our newspaper. The effect of a positive review in a widely popular newspaper can be huge. It was supposed to be published in the weekend edition, but our editor decided that every inch in our newspaper is sacred and I can't distribute it like that, they have to earn it. That spot was 'earned' by a restaurant run by the niece of a local minister. This morning I exhumed the review from under many files

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and research material. I dragged in my clout, called in all my favours and in the end made sure that it will be published next Sunday. Sure, I will not be there to see the results, but that shouldn't matter, if anything, it makes that more selfless. Third, it was this desire that I was most reticent to share. I thought he would find it silly. So I kept it simple and terse. I always wanted to plant a tree. So today morning I planted some, roughly a dozen, I said as quickly as removing a band-aid. There was no sign of mockery in his reaction as I expected. He looked at me wistfully as if I was talking of a memory that was once very dear to him. It didn't last long, he corrected himself and shifted his gaze towards the vehicles in front of us. 'If you don't mind my saying', he said in a hesitant tone, 'you seem to be very cheerful about all this. I don't see any effect of the last night's revelation on you' 'Says the guy who found time to sleep before his death' My remark hurt him, or rather, the word death did. Until then, we managed by using milder euphemisms, but the real word will always have the real effect. He was right though, I was cheerful and I told him why. The moment my guide disappeared, I made a promise to myself. I have only twenty four hours and if there is a thought that has a potential to worry or frighten me and make that time difficult, I would not think of it. I wanted my last few hours to be peaceful. 'But that's just not right', he said confidently almost with a scorn, 'that's not how grief works. The more you try to avoid it, the more it disturbs you. That's what makes it grief. And I don't see a whit of it on your face' Maybe he was right, but I don't see why it matters. Truth is, for me the most dreadful aspect of death is its uncertainty, whether there is something after death or is it just a blank oblivion. Now that I know that there is something to look forward to, even if I don't know what it is, I am not really afraid. It seemed more or less like changing jobs, minus all the efforts wasted in giving interviews and trying to impress people you don't know.

\*\*\*\*\* We both were silent when we reached the destination. We had to cover some of the distance on foot. The alleys were so narrow that I had to walk in front and he followed. These alleys are the veins through which the life forces of any city, the working class, flow through. So they tend to be narrow, strict and more often than not fetid. The guy we went searching for was one of my old informers in the slum. He had a lot of connections among the drivers, maids, gardeners etc., working for influential people

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and selling secrets of those high class people is his most lucrative business. It has been a couple of years since I last met him and that was enough time for his mind to erase me out of his memories. He didn't have the slightest recognition for me. At first he thought we were government officials trying to evict him from the house. Then he mistook us for police in disguise, trying to book him for a crime he did not commit. I tried my best to appeal to his memory. I am not sure to what extent I succeeded because he never revealed what he was holding in his left hand which was hiding behind his back. But when I mentioned the teacher who painted with his mouth, a glint of recognition graced his eyes. 'Terrible, what happened to him. He was a good man, you know, only good people have bad fate. Like me. You do everything right, follow all the rules and still the government wants to throw you out of your house', he said with an intense disdain for us, as if we have a rivalry that transcends lifetimes. I tried to keep him on the topic, the teacher. It made him more suspicious, now he eyed us like we are part of a human trafficking mafia who sell kidneys for the highest bidder. If he had any information regarding the unfortunate teacher, he was reluctant to share. I tried to cajole him, used all my persuasion tactics. I even told him the truth that we are only trying to help the teacher. Somehow truth always makes people more suspicious, especially if it reveals kindness. In the end, he did give us an address, told us that it's an old one and warned us not to get our hopes up. It was clear from his expression that he was eager to get rid of us. This might as well be a fake address. Yet he stretched his palm longingly as we were about to leave. I took out a fifty rupee note from my wallet and gave it to him. He didn't think it was a proper compensation for his time or wasted effort. He was disappointed, we were disappointed. I think it was a deal as fair as a cloud. \*\*\*\*\* We resumed our silence, brooding in his case and observant in mine, as we walked back to the car. The chances of us finding that teacher are very small. Time was not on our side and so far luck wasn't either. From his contorted face and absolute reluctance to speak, I can see that he is well aware of these facts. It is better if he gave up this particular desire and focused on something else. 'Do you think it's the same for everyone', he said as I started the car. He was in no condition to drive, 'I mean the last day notice and the three desires clause' 'It appears so' He nodded, I am not sure he really

heard what I said. He was more or less talking to himself. 'Then how do you think it affects the people on death row. I mean, they already know that they will die the next day. But more importantly there is no chance for them to fulfill their wishes. So when that guide appears to them it will be more like a taunting reminder that they are doomed. It's cruel. What's the purpose of all this? I even asked my guide', he said in a tone of exhortation. 'What did she say?' He glanced at me like he was surprised to see someone sitting by his side, he had to recompose himself before answering. 'She said that the answer to that question is different for everyone. The purpose depends on what kind of a person you are' He was upset. In hopes of cheering him, I asked him about his remaining desires. He said, after this he wants to meet his first wife. They had a bitter divorce and it was his mistake. He wanted to admit that to her for a long time. They were meeting at five in the evening. His next was to apologize to his son, but definitely not over the phone. He wants to face his scorn, look into his eyes and admit that he was wrong in forcing him to choose a career he did not like. His son was at some distance, but still in the same city and by all means reachable. Neither of those events pose a problem. But it struck me ironic that of all the difficult challenges life can throw at us, apologies, speaking a simple set of words, are the ones we would postpone to the very end. 'Since we have two already in the bank, if this doesn't work out, you can choose something simpler and do that instead', I said, trying to lighten his mood. 'How many choices did you get', he said plainly. 'Twenty one' 'How many do you think I got?' 'I don't know, maybe forty' 'Four' 'Forty four?' 'Just four' It didn't make sense. If at twenty six I have twenty one thoughts that can keep me awake at night, at fifty four shouldn't he have more than that. He smiled unamusingly. 'Growing up means losing your optimism. At twenty six, planting a tree may seem like a burning desire, but at fifty four it's just a thought which once seemed very important, but you have since learned to give up on. Your propensity to compromise marks your age better than anything else' 'But that means', I said, unable to complete the sentence. His search for this teacher has assumed a new level of importance. We reached the address given to us, this time there was not much walking to do. We were at the door of a small shack. I can sense his heart pounding inside his chest as he was getting ready to knock. Suddenly I felt bad for

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not taking this task seriously. I could have requested my informer with more conviction had I known what's at stake. Knowing that guy, I am sure he had given us the wrong address. In order to get my new friend ready for the disappointment, I asked him how he can be a hundred percent sure that this is one of his four choices, maybe there is some other desire easily achievable than this. 'My father was a teacher. He lost his hands in an accident; no one hired him after that. Whatever money he earned thereafter he did so from private tuitions. My brother helped him whenever he had to use the blackboard, in a way he became a third hand to my father. I wanted to help too, I just didn't know how. Even after I started earning and became independent, I never knew how I can help him in a way that mattered' I knew, more from the sincerity with which he spoke than from the story, how much helping this teacher meant to him. He knocked and a woman in her mid-thirties opened the door. It was a one room house. In one corner was a small single cylinder stove and few cooking utensils around it, another corner had an old sleeping mat with few tattered blankets and gaunt pillows. The woman was looking at us with a questioning gaze, but neither of us were looking at her. He was there, in the center of the room, facing the wall in the opposite direction and when he turned we saw a painting brush gripped between his teeth. \*\*\*\*\* Hindsight, if you let it, can be the meanest tormentor. It was ten years ago, the last day of school. It may fail to register itself as a big deal now, but then, it was the most important day of my life. I hadn't slept the previous night, like many others in my class. I don't think any of us had faced a life altering experience before. On that day, our lives are about to take a sharp turn into a new path, never to cross with the path which we walked until then. Everyone was present in the classroom, some with tear soaked eyes, some with longing smiles, some making promises not to let time erode their precious friendships; little did we know about the power of time. I was alone in the canteen, entreating myself to not let this opportunity pass, going over the different permutations of the same event that is going to take place in the next ten minutes. She walked in with a wistful smile on her face. I don't know, at what age a person can confidently say, 'I know what love means'. But I, on that day, definitely had no idea what the word means, for I was afraid to ascribe it to what I felt for her. All I knew was that I like the world around me more when I am

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with her. The image of her smile has the capacity to fill up my whole mind. And everything in the world ceases to matter when she's talking to me. Her eyes were filled with a shade of crimson, her face clammy. But her smile, as always widened as she walked towards me. She's carrying her slam book in her left hand, a tool to carry the memories of school. Sitting across, she pushed the book towards me, gesturing to fill it. All my recitals were futile, wiped out of existence, when I saw her in person. But, I was not ready to give up yet. Now and never are the only choices before me. I carefully grabbed the words which were trying to escape, as I filled her slam book and she filled mine. She was the only girl in our class to fill the 'best friend' section with a boy's name, mine. That made things more difficult. What if I embarrass her, what if she thinks I am an idiot, things of course can never be the same again once I tell her how I feel. What if that becomes an invisible barrier between us and reinvents itself as a cause of shame every time she remembers that she once thought of me as her best friend. 'Are you ok', she asked with concern, 'you are sweating too much' The rhythm of my heart was confused, at times it felt too high and the next minute it felt too low. I had to remind myself repeatedly that she asked a question and I had to answer. 'Am I?', I said, acting innocent. She nodded. 'Is there anything you want to tell me' Yes. This is the moment, everything paused around me, or at least slowed down as I rehearsed again for one last time, assured myself that the probability of a positive outcome is the same as the negative one, took a deep breath, filled her image in my eyes. 'Nothing', I said and we exchanged our slam books. \*\*\*\*\* It's a few minutes until five. He was already inside the cafe, both of them were early. Before going in he rubbed his face harshly with his hand kerchief, tidied his hair several times with his thick fingers, and checked the features of his face in the rear view mirror. Despite all the striking dissimilarities, he reminded me of myself on the last day of our school, innocent and confused. A solemn smile visited my lips. Not knowing the reason for its appearance, he corrected himself in mild embarrassment and got down avoiding looking at me. He took a few steps before turning back. 'I am sorry that you had to waste your time with me', he said, I waved my hand casually as if to say it was nothing, 'I think I am ok now, I have things under control. You can leave if you want to' I thought about it for a second. 'I'll stay until you come back', I

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don't know what prompted me to say that. He left. I stayed in the car, contemplating over all the untrodden paths of my life and a few trodden ones. Not just the thoughts that visit me often, but the ones that were driven to some small corner and stayed there without any recognition. I let them pass through that limelight inside, for one last time, as they flowed like water in a river, the water that makes up a river. Overall, my life didn't seem like a bad one. It has been above average and I am glad of it. I was in a trance and the tap on the window pane came from a long distance, as if emanating from a deep well. I thought it was just minutes since he went in, but he said, quite emphatically that it was close to an hour. He looked concerned, something was worrying him again. Even with a thousand chances I couldn't have imagined that the worry was for me. 'Where is your mobile?', he asked with a sense of urgency smeared all over him. I reminded him that I decided to not entertain anything which can cause me worry. So I left my mobile at my house. He wasn't impressed. Apparently someone from our office has been trying to contact

me all day. And since we left together, he received the call after several failed attempts to reach me. It could be the tone of his voice or it could be his mentioning our editor, but I found the realisation prefabricated in my mind, before he told me what the news was. My review about the restaurant was snubbed again. Despite my effort, our chief editor has decided not to publish it. Which means one of my wishes has been undone. 'I tried to convince him, but he wouldn't listen', he said with an air of desperation. He was a little confused to find me unaffected by his revelation. He wanted to remind me, quite seriously that time is running out. Truth be told, the guy inside me has been wishing for something like this to happen. He smiled from within. 'I know what to do', I said calmly. Expressing first love is going to be the last thing I officially do in this life. Not a bad way to end it. 'Do you need any help' Impulsively, I shook my head first, then realized something. I asked him if I could make a call from his phone. He offered it happily. Numbers played musical chairs in my mind, I couldn't recall her number accurately. I dallied for several minutes, while my finger hovered over the final touch that would make

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the call. I relented, the call went through, someone a thousand miles away picked up. I cut it. I can't remember her number and that leaves me with only one option. I have to go and meet her in person. I glanced at my watch, there is still enough time to make it, talk to her and leave a few more minutes to spend with myself again. I turned back to give his mobile back but couldn't see where he was. A crowd replaced him. I burrowed through the crowd and found him in the center, lying down on the road, clutching his chest behind which his heart is trying to retire itself. It didn't make sense; he is supposed to have two more hours. Then I realized that he did have two hours, but he will be spending them in some hospital, away from realizing his last desire. Everything around me hurtled so quickly that new thoughts failed to make any impact. Someone called an ambulance which took him away to a nearby hospital. As they placed him on the gurney and carried him away, only I could correctly understand the horror in his eyes. Minutes later, when I realized that there isn't much time to lose, I tried calling his son. He did not pick up. He would not pick up his father's call. I could have borrowed someone's mobile and called him from that, but I am not sure he would be devastated enough to come hurrying within two hours to check on his father. After all they were not on speaking terms and he did not know that these are his father's last two hours. The turmoil inside my mind took hold of me. In less than ten minutes, I checked my watch more than a dozen times. There is only one thing that can save my last friend on earth from eternal damnation. I have to go get his son. The problem is, he lives on one side of the city, far away from my current location and she, my original destination lives on the opposite side, equally far away. If I decide to go for him, I may not have enough time to get to her. I got into his car and drove away. Seconds are precious and I am not rich enough to waste them. \*\*\*\*\* He still had twenty minutes left when I ran through the white tiled hospital corridors, with his son by my side. The doctor was not particularly pleased about the idea of allowing visitors into ICU for a patient whose condition has been constantly critical. I had to apply all my mastery in persuasion. Still it was less persuasion than it was required to convince the man beside me that his father was on his deathbed and wanted to speak with him. The doctor did not permit me in, only family members, he said. That is not a problem, I have compelling

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responsibilities of my own to attend to. I ran out with the same speed I came in, borrowed the car again. I believe the owner wouldn't mind, his son might mind a little but it would be a matter of no consequence by the time he realised that his father's car is missing. Time showed no mercy. It raced on, however hard I subliminally pleaded it to wait for me to catch up. I know there is still time to reach her, I believed I could do it. All I have to do is to figure out how to move this car faster than it is supposed to. Then from the corner of my eye I noticed, the accretion of empty air into something perceivable. It was my guide, he appeared again and his wordless expression looked grim. I instinctively looked at the watch. There is still time, I told him so. He stayed silent. The guy inside me reminded me that death is not always as instant as we expect it to be. It was clearly proved in the case of my friend. I pleaded with my guide, begged him to spare a few more minutes for me, I will be done. That's all I need, a few more minutes to avoid an eternity of damnation. I am sure now that I can do it. I am very close. He slowly shook his head sideways. There was a distant unnerving pity in his eyes; he had seen too many people plead in their last stages. Then I noticed a lorry, hurling down the road at the same speed as me. He didn't have to tell me that it is the herald of my death. I somehow knew it with certainty. For the first time in the last twenty-four hours I experienced genuine unbridled fright. I was just minutes away from her house. She would never know that I died trying to reach her. I could probably avoid the collision if I really wanted to, but for some reason I didn't even try. 'So this is it' He nodded. 'How long will I have to spend wandering here?' He looked perplexed. 'You don't have to, I am here to take you with me' Now I was perplexed. 'But I haven't finished my third task' 'Yes you have', he said with a nonchalant rectitude, 'You helped someone in dire need of it, without expecting anything in return. It's one of your mortal desires, remember?' The image of my last friend on earth, who is dead by now, flashed in my mind. Relief inundated all my senses in that moment. It is a bliss all the sages in the world meditate their whole lives to achieve. I turned towards the imp, he looked like the bestest friend anyone can have. I am not sure why he nodded, but it felt reassuring. A part of my bliss tried to escape through my eyes, moistening my

cheek on its way down. I didn't want any more of it to escape, I want to hold it as long as I can. I closed my eyes. \*\*\*\*\*

Thankfully, the devotees had by then already entered the inner precincts, one by one.

“*Arre! Sujata beta?*” *Panditji* addressed almost everybody as his son. “Were you inside all this while? I did not see you go in. How is your mother doing now? Has she come home from the hospital yet?” All his words were falling on deaf ears.

“*Panditji*, by any chance, have you ever seen a massive lady inside?” In trepidation, my voice came out a tad bit louder than required, and I realized I was pointing towards the sanctum