

Hangin'g By A Moment

Spandan

I pushed the buttons on the dial of my old Tatafone. 2...7...5...0...3...6...9. My earphone mirrored the ringing of the phone on the other end.

“Hello...” the voice suggested femininity and age.

“Hello, Manish *hain?*”

“Manish *wapis nahin ayaa hain, paanch minute baad phone karna.*” she replied and banged the phone down.

I continued to stare at the moving pictures on the TV screen. The TV was an old one, with no remote; so I sat with my face glued to the screen in order to be within easy reach of the buttons on the console. I watched and waited, not really concentrating on the flickering images being too lost in thought and boredom.

It was eleven o' clock and I had already called Manish's house four times. Each time the grandmother picked up and replied that Manish was out. By now, I felt he had surely eaten through the old lady's nerves. On the other hand, Manish himself had asked me to call if I decided to go out anywhere that night.

Five minutes later, I picked up the phone. But each time I had decided to call up, I seemed to be less sure about my actions. This time, the crescendo of doubt seemed to have reached its peak. It needed a lot of mental effort to push the buttons on the dial.

2...7, I dialled and thought... I would really be bugging Manish's grandmother.

5...0... May be Manish would not want to go out that night. Manish would think that I was desperate to go out. No, I wasn't *desperate*, was I?

3...6... Yes, the grandmother would really begin to mind now. Manish would be too tired, anyway.

9... “I'm perfectly fine where I am. The night will pass.” I put the phone down.

It is universally believed that I think too much. Any proposed action would usually be thought out to great depth and then, vetoed. Philosophising has brought me to the conclusion that the world was better off if you let it stay the way it is. When definitive action did spring from my body it occurred in spurts and bursts; when the brain was not allowed to mull over matters for any amount of time at all. Thus, when I decided to put the phone down, I also switched off the TV and the living room lights, headed for my room and shut myself in.



mirror, mirror on our world...



“I'm not fine where I am. This night will never pass.”

And I cursed myself like I had so often done before. Cursed my stupidity, my need to think too much and above all, my goddamned hypocrisy...the hypocrisy that made me stop the phone call because Manish's grandmother would mind. Now thinking with a clearer mind I realized I actually didn't give a damn about the grand mom. How could I ever let some thought as stupid as that spoil a potential freaky night out with the guys? I felt like kicking myself but was scared of the pain.

As for the other excuses, I knew very well that Manish always went out to the clubs again after midnight. He'd told me that. But I'd forgotten... almost as if I'd hypnotized myself to forget every argument that might have made it easier to go through with that call. It was an almost unbelievable occurring - infuriating, exasperating and all such words. How could someone be that stupid?

And I *was* desperate. But too afraid to show it anyone. To Manish or his grandmother. Too afraid to see it myself. I had read novels and seen movies but never had I come across stories of the Infinite Boredom that strangled my every night.

My room was filled with books already read. My head; with thoughts already stale. In sleepless hours of the night they would combine to form a stagnant mass of stillness and boredom. I never drowned in it. Drowning releases a lot more adrenaline. Lying on my bed staring into nowhere, my body was stuck halfway underwater. Not falling. Not rising. Not floating. Just stuck. With the sluggish, muggy waves of insipid listlessness lapping my cheeks while my ears echoed the buzzing of mosquitoes. There was no TV, no stereo in my room. So even on the coldest of days, I switched on the ceiling fan and let the whirring preserve some sense of motion and sanity. Hell is over-rated. It was then that I decided that it was time to spark up... yes, spark up a new revolution. I went to drawer and there it lay, under all those stupid books. White, thin, beautiful. Who in the world would want to know about Mechanics of Solids or Thermodynamics anyway? The world is too complicated to understand. As I worked on my cigarette, I kept thinking how beautiful it would be if all of us would be farmers. Crush, clean, crush. Everyone grows his own food, no clubs, no colleges, no lonely nights. Fill it back up and up goes the spark. A deep drag and I am already elated. A few more and I was thanking Christ for these small favours. I came out to my balcony and looked outside. It was cold. I took off my shirt. I was just trying to fly. My throat went dry. I was feeling hungry. Incontrollable fits would start soon. I thought that I was a puppet and my body started shaking in all directions as if all my strings were being pulled at the same time. The fog kept rising from the lake.



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But while my body stagnated, my brain raced, searching vast emptiness for new dreams and deep sleep. It would take hours before I find either. I thought of the article I wanted to write for Cactus Flower and decided on the topic “The Attack of The Crows”. Crows are a menace and they have attacked me more than once, and I believe they can be deadly.

But The Inertia was too strong. It kept my body rooted to where I was although I longed to move and fly. It kept my mind searching around at fearful speeds although I longed for it to stop and rest. Even the dreams had dried up, images had become less spectacular. And I didn't know why.

I could correct it all right now, couldn't I? Not calling up wasn't a final decision. All I had to do was walk fifteen steps to the living room. But the mere thought of this brought an almost violent objection. No, I was fine where I was. I was O.K. It was just another night. Suddenly I felt walking fifteen steps was tougher than facing three hours of sleeplessness. The Inertia was in control. And I didn't know why.

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Thoughts Occur. Events Happen. Dreams Fly. Clocks Tick. Time Passes. Life Sucks.

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I gathered the car keys in my hand, looking around cautiously with the help of light from my watch's Indiglo dial. I could hear the wooden-flooring creak beneath my feet, if that was indeed possible, while my sneakers squeaked underneath. Even the thumps of my beating heart could not drown a myriad other nonexistent noises. I imagined that my parents were waking up. The bright side, I realized, was that I was imagining things again. Then I stepped slowly to the door and grasped the knob with sweaty hands. I turned it and stopped with the first noise. Then I turned it again, stopped, turned, stopped, turned till the door could finally be pulled slowly back. The hinges creaked. I slid myself through the smallest possible gap between door and doorframe as sneakily as I could and then patiently closed the door. Breaking the rules was okay. Getting caught breaking them was not.

Outside, the dark empty corridor sprang to life and light. The air smelt less of damp death or despair. The excess adrenalin allowed a thousand volts of electric excitement to travel up my spine. Muscles contracted involuntarily in a shiver of excitement. I managed to keep my feet and not to scream, but it was a close thing on both counts.



mirror, mirror on our world...



Eyes red and pupils dilated, I walked down the stairs in carefully measured steps. Reaching the car in the underground parking lot, I realized that my legs wanted to remain in motion. Willpower and an unusual amount of physical effort were needed to stop, unlock the door and get into the driver's seat. Once in, I fumbled around in the darkness for the light switch. Finding it eventually, I flicked it on and lit up the cabin. The car looked the way it had always looked. I didn't pause to reflect further or explore the surroundings. Inserting the key into the ignition, I started the engine on the very first attempt and pulled out towards the gate.

The startled watchman awoke and stumbled out of his cabin, electric torch in hand. He walked up beside the window and examined my face in the torchlight with drowsy eyes. Unused to such late night outings, he asked in stumbling Hindi, "Where are you going so late at night?" I could taste the cheap alcohol and tobacco in the watchman's breath. Same as me, only the status was different.

"I have to go to my friend's house."

The watchman peered at my face still suspicious, refusing to make a move towards the gate.

"My friend - he's sick. In hospital. The doctors say he's serious."

The mention of illness and a possible death brought about a slow transformation in his behaviour. He started to move. The silent curses I had been receiving for breaking his sleep lessened. The watchman dragged himself to the gate and pushed it wide. I drove the car through even before it could be opened fully. The watchman, out of character, uttered a silent prayer for the friend and hastened to fall back asleep.

Moving out of the apartment block, the car travelled through narrow by lanes bordered with two rows of evenly blackened windows. Mercury lamp lit ghosts haunted the street corners. The ghosts talked. One whispered that the road lay just ahead and I pushed the accelerator in anticipation. The Whisper Echoed. The Speed Gathered. "The road is nearer... the road is nearer," my ears chanted slowly. At every corner a new ghost whispered. The Whisper Echoed, finding for itself a new frequency.

The Road is nearer... The Road is nearer... The Road is nearer..." The Speed Gathered, as I felt my breath get stale in my mouth. When all possible frequencies had been used up, the whispers joined up to resonate in a hypnotic concerto of pure noise.

"THE ROAD IS NEARER... THE ROAD IS NEARER ...THE ROAD IS NEARER...THE ROAD IS NEARER."



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The Ghosts Chanted. The Whispers Echoed. And Resonated. While the Speed Gathered. And then the Road arrived. A wide empty street haunted by no one; not even life. A different time, a different dimension, which, with one mighty stroke rubbed clear the reverberating murmurs. I wiped my sweating face with a wetter hand. My shirt was drenched. The steering wheel slipped too.

But the air smelt fresh. The stench was gone.

And my mind felt rested as I stepped on the accelerator to make me travel faster, run harder. I was in a car. I could touch, feel and control anything inside. Everything else was outside, separated from my actions by a wall of fibreglass. Anyway, any dimension other than this car was moving away too fast. The Rest of the World was a fleeting, untouchable, uncontrollable glimpse. Speeding down the deserted highway, I forgot to worry about all which I could not control right then. I forgot to worry about my parents waking up and finding me gone. I forgot about my future and about the struggle to stand up on my own feet. I forgot about my loves and hates. I forgot about the gear stick in top gear, the clutch and the brake. There was just the road the ahead, the steering wheel and the accelerator. Soon, when the engine ran out of more power and the foot rested in its final position on the accelerator pedal, those thoughts too slipped away. I rolled down the windows. The whoosh of the wind flying by deafened my ears and blinded my eyes.

“Take a step back,” some ghost whispered, “Relax.”

There it was, lying before me. The dream I had never dreamt.

“Take a step back.”

And watch yourself ride the wild horses.

“Relax.”

Let the winds carry you where they wish.

The road ahead seemed straight and empty. Heaven is over-rated. Barren of surprises. My mind travelled higher into newer realms of peace. Why worry even about the steering wheel?

The Road gets straighter and straighter. Just relax.

Forget yourself in a blitzkrieg of speed.

“Baby Jesus, meek and mild, pray for me, an orphan child. Be my strength, be my friend, be with me until the end. Amen.”



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