COUNTDOWN TO THE LAST HOUR (PART 2)

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Simrit quickly stopped by the lobby to pick up her photo. She couldn't help but notice how ridiculous she looked, decked up in a skydiving suit and helmet, arms flailing in midair. Sighing, she tucked the photo away in her purse and took out her schedule to check what was next on the agenda. She had a work-related meeting around 9:30 – she needed to head back to her apartment and rehearse her presentation. As she walked to the subway station, her phone vibrated. It was Mom, FaceTiming her. Simrit could always count on her Mom to FaceTime her at the most inconvenient moments.

"Hello, *beta*," her mom greeted her. "How was skydiving?"

Simrit glanced down at the phone and conjured a smile. "It was great," she said.

"Did you take pictures?" Mom asked.

"Yep, I got pictures," Simrit responded.

"Good, good!" Mom said, with a bright smile on her face. "What are you going to do now?"

"I have some work-related things I need to finish up," Simrit responded. "Then, I was thinking about maybe hanging out with Meera in the afternoon."

"Oh, okay. Are you free this evening?"

"Sure, I guess I am. Why?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to come over for dinner! You hardly visit us anymore. I'll make your favorite – *chhole bhature*!" Mom responded, a twinkle of excitement in her eyes. Simrit couldn't possibly refuse. The past few days had felt quite lonely, and she hadn't talked to Mom in a while, excluding the one-minute conversations every few days to reassure Mom that she was taking care of herself and eating well.

"Okay, I'll come. See you in a bit."

"Ok *beta*, bye. *Sat Sri Akaal*."

"*Sat Sri Akaal*."

Simrit slipped her phone into the back pocket of her jeans. The brief conversation she had with her mother lingered in her mind as she walked. The spontaneity of the invitation felt *off* – her parents were planners through and through. Something was wrong.

Needing a distraction, Simrit put her AirPods on and listened to Taylor Swift as she walked into the crowded subway station.

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It was 6:03. Simrit exited her car and walked toward her parents' house. The lawn was nicely mowed, the flowers on the windowsill perfectly arranged. Simrit rang the doorbell. Mom opened the door.

"*Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh*," Simrit and her mom greeted each other. "How are you?" Mom asked, clasping Simrit's hands in hers.

"Good!" Simrit replied with a smile. Mom ushered her into the living room, made Simrit sit, and called her dad downstairs. Simrit sat in the armchair in the corner of the room, briefly exchanging eye contact and a polite smile with her mom before turning her attention to the furniture in the room. She surveyed the decor intently, trying to avoid any potentially awkward interactions.

Mom then began to make some chit-chat. "Do you want some tea or milk?" she asked. "The *chhole* will take some time to finish cooking, and you must be hungry."

"Sure, I'll have some tea," Simrit responded.

"Okay, give me just a few minutes – I'll make a fresh pot," Mom responded.

"I'll come help!" Simrit responded. Something tangible to do, that would surely stimulate conversation. She remembered the days when she was young, when her mom had taught her how to make tea for the family – a skill she thought would come in handy when Simrit grew older and needed tea to keep her awake while she studied.

The two made their way into the kitchen. Nothing had changed since Simrit's childhood. Simrit opened the familiar cupboard containing the ingredients for *chai*, all neatly arranged just as she had remembered. The jar with the tea leaves was in the front, the one with the cardamom right behind, and the sugar jar on the top shelf. While her mom put out an assortment of snacks onto a tray, Simrit finished pouring three cups of tea. Right then, her dad came downstairs.

"*Sat Sri Akaal*, Simrit!" her dad greeted with a large smile on her face. Simrit greeted her dad with a hug. "Sorry, my work meeting went overtime because my colleague just keeps talking," her dad chuckled. Simrit laughed with him.

The three settled comfortably in the living room, where they drank tea, ate some sweets, and chatted.

"How's your job going?" Dad asked.

"It's good," Simrit responded. She thought of details she might add, but decided it would take too much effort to explain.

"Good, good," Dad responded.

"We're so happy you came today. Why don't you come over more often?" Mom asked, her voice tinged with sadness. They missed their only child.

"I've been so busy with work, and making progress with my list, that I haven't had a whole lot of extra time," Simrit said.

"No, that's good; I'm glad you're making progress with your list. But just come over whenever you have time, okay?" Mom said. "Your dad and I get so lonely sometimes."

"Yes, I'll try to come over more." She smiled.

Around the same time, a beeping sound came from the kitchen. "I guess the *chhole* are done! I'll go start making the *bhature*. Simrit, could you help bring some things to the table?" Mom asked.

"Sure," Simrit responded. Making *bhature* was a team effort – her mom rolled them out, and her dad fried them. In the meantime, Simrit brought plates and utensils to the table. Once she was done, she took her seat at the table and waited for her parents.

The family gathered around the table. Apart from phrases like “please pass the salad” or “can you pass the chhole,” there was not much conversation to make. Simrit recognized her fault in this – every single-phrase response she gave to an earnest question made her heart sink with guilt. She simply didn’t know what to say or how to say it.

“So how are things?”
“Good.”

“How’s Meera?”
“She’s fine.”

“Anything interesting happen lately?”
“Not really.”

Everything was going according to plan; there wasn’t any room for unpredictability in her pretty much predetermined life. It was as if life had become a never-ending treadmill. She was constantly moving forward – that’s what everyone told her – but she felt like she wasn’t really getting anywhere.

Occasionally, Mom would bring up a reference from Simrit’s childhood. “Oh, I can’t believe how you still pick out the onions! You’ve been doing that since you were 2!” She laughed. “*Beta*...it’s good to learn how to not be so picky.”

Simrit laughed. “I don’t think you can get me to ever eat *piaaj,* Mom... it just has such a weird texture.”

Mom sighed. “Can I try the what-will-your-friends-think one again?”

Simrit’s dad intervened. “I’m pretty sure we’ve exhausted that technique,” he chuckled.

After this bite-sized conversation ended, the room again fell into silence. Simrit’s mom finally brought out dessert – warm *gulab jamuns*.

Simrit couldn’t help but feel that the dinner was a goodbye, a last attempt at connection – her parents had made Simrit’s favorite foods and tried hard to avoid the topic of her only having 3 months left to live. Before, her parents pressed hard for her to plan out her life, to do meaningful things, to make a clear plan of what she wanted to achieve and when. Today, her parents didn’t interrogate her or give her any life advice. Things had slowed down.

After finishing dessert, Mom asked Simrit to come over to the sofa to watch *Indian Idol*, Simrit's childhood favorite.

"You used to love this show!"

Simrit plastered a smile onto her face. As she sat on the sofa, she couldn't focus on the songs or share in Mom's singing commentary. She felt like she was assuming a garment of her fictitious self, being her but not feeling herself, sitting with her mom but unable to actively engage with her.

Around 9, Simrit's mom and dad escorted her to the door, where they hugged her tightly, reminded her to take care of herself, and handed her boxes full of food to take home with her. In her car, Simrit waved one last time to her parents and waited for them to close the front door. She then her head against the steering wheel for a minute, or two, or five. Finally, she put in her key and drove home.

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Before sleeping, Simrit opened her laptop to check tomorrow's plan. There were two main items on her schedule: go to the grocery store to restock on chips and microwavable meals, and go rafting with her friend for a "fun-filled afternoon." After closing her laptop, Simrit got into her twin-sized bed, and for a few minutes, simply stared at the dark green curtains right in front of her – they came with the apartment and she had never cared to change them to a more tasteful color.

Simrit lay with her arms loosely folded above her head, her hair sprawled across the pillow, as she looked up at the ceiling covered with that floral wallpaper she so despised. Simrit had checked off another item from her bucket list, but she still felt unfulfilled. She wished something exciting, something new, something unexpected, would happen in her life. Her early death she had accepted many years ago, when her parents first introduced the concept to her at the age of 5. It had seemed normal for a while. But over the last few years, Simrit began to lose motivation to do things. She remembered her parents' lectures from her childhood:

"Planning is extremely important."

"You only have one chance to do this."

"When will you learn?"

“Why can’t you be like your friends?”

As Simrit lay in her bed, she wished she could simply take off, go somewhere far away. Perhaps then she could do what she wanted, whatever that was.

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“Good morning, Simrit. Today is Thursday, July 21st, 2022. You have 17 hours more to live. Have a nice day.”

Simrit groaned. Today was the day, as her alarm had kindly reminded her. A feeling of weakness, an unwillingness to get out of bed, crept through her body. Her phone was beeping. Simrit turned over in bed toward the night table and grabbed her phone. She found dozens of messages on Instagram. Casual goodbye messages from friends explaining how much they had loved Simrit and would miss her.

“omg simrit you’ve been such an amazing friend and the sweetest person i’ve known i’ll miss u!”

“you’re an amazing colleague & friend, have a great last day!”

“so sad to lose you so early but ig that’s just life...hope you are able to celebrate & have fun today!

The edges of Simrit’s mouth curled into a smile as she scrolled through Instagram. The messages were surprisingly uplifting, even amusing. It wasn’t every day that she felt so popular.

Today was the only day Simrit hadn’t planned. Simrit got out of bed, put on a sparkly purple knee-length dress that she had never worn before, and decided to leave her hair open for a change. She smiled as she looked into the mirror. She looked different with her hair down.

Simrit went into the kitchen and warmed a pack of Maggie noodles. As she slurped on her noodles, she checked her phone for updates. All of her affairs had already been put in order. Her shoulders relaxed. There was nothing left to do – she could do whatever she wanted today. Simrit began to brainstorm ways to spend her day.

Hang out with Meera? *Nah, too boring.*

Go to the beach? *Too cold.*

Play tennis with Sana? *Not in the mood.*

Eat as much junk food as I can until I feel sick? *Possibly.*

After having every other day of her life planned, Simrit felt slightly uneasy not knowing exactly what was in store for the day. Deep in thought, she stared unattentively at the woman yelling the news on the TV.

At 9 am her watch beeped. A reminder that she should have reached work by now, after having gone on her morning jog, showered, and eaten breakfast. Of course, she did not have to worry about work anymore – she was officially retired for the past week, but had decided to keep the alarm on to ensure she was always cognizant of the time. *I should probably get up now. Don't want the day to be over before I get to actually do something.*

Without really thinking, she grabbed a coat from her closet and put on a pair of suede boots that she decided would go well with her outfit. Simrit simply wanted to get out of her house, catch a whiff of fresh air for a change. Locking her apartment door behind her, she made her way down the stairs of the apartment complex and stepped onto the pavement. *Let's see...what can I do.* Simrit walked along the sidewalk, paying careful attention to the shops and stores along her path for the first time.

Simrit kept walking. And walking. And walking. Until she passed in front of the entrance to a mall. It was a large mall, one of the largest in the area. She hardly went to the mall – it was rarely an activity she would be willing to budget time for, seeing as Target fulfilled her needs perfectly.

Simrit stood in front of the glass doors to the mall for a few minutes, until she felt someone's shoulder bump against hers, accompanied by a disgruntled "are you gonna stand here all day?" Startled, Simrit stepped to the side and muttered an apology. Through the window, Simrit saw a shimmery silver dress on a mannequin. It was covered in sequins. Certainly something she would never wear. For some reason, she wanted it. Even though she'd never wear it.

Simrit made up her mind and stepped inside the mall. She took a whiff of the perfumey scent. The sound of people was a pleasant change from her largely solitary week. Almost robotically, Simrit walked toward the mannequin with the shimmery silver dress. *Since I can't wear it, what's the point?* said the logical part of her mind. Simrit checked the price tag. It was $100. Feeling a sense of rebelliousness, she looked through the hangers for a small size of the dress and draped it over her arm. Inwardly, she smiled. *Why stop now?* Simrit then made her way toward the coats section, and picked out a nice gray trench coat. $75. Feeling a need to complete the outfit, she decided to purchase a black button-down blouse and a pair of whitewashed jeans too. Another $100.

The desire to shop spread throughout her being like a contagion. The more she saw, the more she bought. Simrit rushed into changing rooms, taking pleasure in seeing herself look so different. Price tags no longer mattered. She didn't feel the usual pang of guilt every time she bought something expensive. The act of buying gave Simrit a level of thrill she had never experienced before. After finishing with one store, she moved on to the next. Her arms began to feel sore from carrying so many bags.

It was soon lunchtime. Simrit grabbed a Subway sandwich from the food court and picked a small table tucked away in the corner. She observed the people around her. Moms dragged their children around. Groups of friends walked hastily, carrying shopping bags full of clothes. People with AirPods in their ears hustled as they peered intently into their phones, glancing up every few seconds to make sure they didn't run into something.

Everyone moved so fast. Simrit only noticed this when she was sitting at a table alone, with nothing to do but watch the people in her suroundings. The fear of missing out, being late, not doing enough – these were fears that had always haunted her. But today, she simply watched as everyone else hurried along with their lives. She was now beyond these fears.

Simrit didn't realize how much time she spent in the food court until her watch buzzed at 3 pm. *Wow... I've been here for almost 2 hours*. Simrit rose from her seat and threw her trash into the bin close by. She then decided to walk around the mall some more, buying a few more pairs of clothes and some beauty products. After deciding her arms were physically incapable of holding any more bags, she decided to leave.

Simrit called an Uber. Within 10 minutes, she reached her apartment complex. Simrit hauled her bags of clothes out of the car and up the stairs. She dropped her bags onto the kitchen island and collapsed into the nearest armchair, arms burning from carrying so much weight. After warming two slices of left over pizza for herself, Simrit curled up on the sofa and switched on *Countdown to the Last Hour*, her favorite soap opera.

Her watch again rang at 10 pm. It was her typical sleep time. Seeing no legitimate reason to stay up, she decided to go to bed. Before she did that, though, she took out the clothes from her shopping bags, ripped off the tags, and hung them in her closet. Each one had been fun to try on. *Now, they're officially mine.*

She then brushed her teeth, changed into a comfortable pair of pajamas, and got into her bed. She looked one last time at her alarm clock – she wouldn't hear it ring tomorrow. The thought was comforting. The alarm clock had been an annoying reminder of how much time she had left to make her life worth it. She would never have to hear it again.

Simrit turned off the nightlight next to her bed and lay in her bed, blanket pulled up to her chin. Now that her death was only a few hours away, questions abounded in her mind. How would it feel? Would she even feel anything at all?

An hour passed.

Simrit was still awake. After all, what was the point of sleeping when she was about to be put into an eternal sleep within a few hours? Simrit wanted to experience the sensation of fading away into darkness. She stared at her bedroom ceiling and tried to occupy her mind with thoughts to prevent the blanket of sleep from descending over her.

Eventually, however, her eyes became overcome with fatigue, and they closed. Simrit had fallen asleep.

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CRASH! The garbage truck's mechanical arms slammed into the trash can in front of Simrit's apartment complex, sending its contents flying across the street. Simrit woke up, annoyed and startled, and sat upright in her bed. Instinctively, she grabbed her phone from her night table. Today was Friday, July 22nd. Simrit's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Why hadn't the alarm woken her up? She looked over at her alarm clock. Its screen was black. Then it hit her. Yesterday was July 21st, 2022. The day she was supposed to have died. Now, a full day later, she was still very much alive.

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