

He hadn't taken a day off in ten years. He was going to the gym, ate healthy, managed his time well, made love, and overall seemed happy; in return he was efficient at work. The best of the crop, they would have all agreed. Or, did. Switching to past tense takes time. It had been a week, though.

He had restored his phone to factory settings for his mother, as promised for her birthday, and then blown his brains out. A good son.

The house maid managed to fill her empty slot, in the same building, with the family whom he had once recommended her to in passing. In a rushed benevolence or in the spirit of gossip they had promptly fired their existing maid and taken her in. His sister- the fraternal twin with identical nose- had counted on him to introduce her Muslim boyfriend to their Hindu parents, but that was now a minor inconvenience; she was crestfallen. His girlfriend- ex girlfriend of two weeks- had suitors knocking; her sex appeal enhanced by her boyfriend's passing. She hadn't declared the breakup. His Facebook wall was filled with flattering testimonials from friends. The media community had taken the loss as their own and competing hash-tags were sprouting on the internet. Barring the public grave he had become where some strangers had sauntered by and left passersby RIP's, it wasn't so bad. (Good thing he didn't have Instagram.)

He had parked his car in the basement and was walking towards the lift when he found it, naked, in a municipal bin. He stared, felt it on his fingertips, and hurriedly hid it at the base of the bin and took the lift up to the terrace restaurant.

Someone pressed his shoulder with affection. He turned. Once he had wanted to be like him, he thought. Now he was more than him, but less like him. The dinner, as all recent ones, was a celebration of his achievements. Latest being the interview of a reclusive industrialist. At 32 this was a major feat for any journalist. Upswing had been his trend. The party was business as usual: the girlfriend moved around wife-like; the mentor sat in a corner mentoring someone else; colleagues kept their envy to themselves and shared inside jokes on seasonal office gossips; he grumbled his refrains on the lack of good beer in the country. Beer is what he drank these days. He had been off the "bottle" for two years. Oscillating between loathing and devouring for months, one day, he gave it up. Just like that. Nobody had noticed before and nobody noticed after. Everybody was happily drunk. He was so easily past it that he doubted if it was addiction at all. He was impressed with himself. But something familiar had returned that evening. His toes were wiggling in the shoes. His mind was in the parking lot.

Next day he skipped the juice corner for lunch and went to the cafe. He sat with a laptop. Every now and then, with each fresh cup of coffee, he pretended to be talking over the phone. He was faking it, for no particular reason. He did that for four hours.

In the morning he woke up with his usual 7'o clock news on TV. The breaking news from last night was still breaking-- two more female translators had come forward, piggybacking, making the politician look like a serial molester of translators. Disinterested, he turned it off and stayed in. For four days he did just that, and ignored the calls of delicious scoops, the cries for righteous indignation, the need for important questions, etc. At last he submitted the obligatory medical leave. While was barely convincing, no one protested because he "deserved" it. In the last two

years, he had outperformed all. In fact, they offered him his annual leave. Now he had additional 21 days. To obsess over a thought that had clung to him like love's first infatuation. He had it locked up in a box, and the key was under his mattress, right in the centre where he slept. Some nights he'd wake up thrice to check on it, only to open it and lock it back again. What was happening to him? Nothing reasoned.

His girlfriend had had enough. He had dodged her for one week. Next week she barged in. She screamed, and he dumped her. Shocked, she left. His stage had moved. He wanted to reset the drama, with a button. The immediate being the one that came on every morning.

At 7, it came on again. There was a fire raging in the mountains up North. Army had been called in. He looked at it blankly. "Fire on the mountain... run run run..." he remembered and it took him to a rare family picnic. He had come back home for summer vacations. Father and mother were playing house-house amiably in a sharp contrast to the year before. This had filled him with hope. They promptly packed the basket on his suggestion. They were smiling and happy, but he was afraid the camera wouldn't capture them as they were. He kept taking pictures as backup-one after another. Same shot, 36 times. Irritated, his father boxed his ears. Mother intervened. And just like that the harmony band snapped. That's all it took. The Yashica camera must be in the old pooja room/ store on the second floor. One of the photos was hung in the living room.

Rest 35 photos were hiding behind other snapshots in a tattered album. Once, he laid out all 36 to compare, as though to catch a pretend expression. He didn't find any.

A fortnight had gone by and then came a night. Legs resting on the dashboard, a lifetime swaying in the autumn tree, the eeriness of a quiet urban river, and a windshield for a window- it all fills you with so much peace that it oozes out from your nose to the empty passenger seat. It sits next to you, like a person. It doesn't talk or, most importantly, talk back. Anal in the certitude of your existence you sit another hour into dawn, challenging. Nothing happens, for a long time. Then, hint of a far sun spreads. It starts filling you with hope, which starts taking you over. First peace, now hope. You become air. You then go home and shoot the lightness out of you with the thing you had found naked in the bin by the elevator in the parking lot.

Whoosh! Floating and free-falling...

Sunlight had filtered in. The morning TV in the background was agonising: somewhere an infant had fallen into a borehole and 26 hours later still surviving. The room looked an abstract art installation in red. Its nucleus: a human pit.