

He has lost all count of time; in fact, I am sure that he has lost all sense of time and space. He does not know where he is; he is in prison. He even knows the reason behind his being here, he has killed, he has taken lives; he does not remember anymore if it was some time back or a long time back; all he remembers was that sometime in the past and it could be anywhere from a week ago to even ten years ago, he killed. He does not repent for having killed that person; he had been seriously wronged and he felt that it was better for him to have avenged the wrong and as a result end up in prison rather than to sit around moping for the rest of his life that he had been wronged. Life is nothing but a series of impulses and one cannot regret what happened for it is already in the past.

It was four 'o' clock that early October morning. No one in their right mind ever gets up at four in the morning. Over his tenure in the prison, he had even forgotten what four in the morning looked like. Yes, he had to get up at six sharp everyday and that was thanks to the siren that blew its head out every morning at six. Given an option, he would have stayed in bed until God knows what time. To be fair to the man there was only a limited set of things that one could do in prison and none of them required him to be up at six in the morning.

Coming back to him, at four in the morning, he hears a gentle tap on the door of his cell. Given the nature of his crime and seriousness of the punishment involved, they have given him a separate cell. I am not sure if it was originally intended to save him from the rest of the criminals or if it was to save the rest of the criminal world from him. Either way, it suited him fine; he got his peace and quite, if one could call it peace and quite.

I am sorry that I am being carried away time and again. For some reason, I am impelled to describe him rather than what is going to happen. I do know that the event scheduled for today is more important than the man is, for it shall decide who the man is. I am sure that you all know by now that today is the day that he is to be executed.

The words are so easy are they not? 'To be executed', to be removed from existence, to be erased from the world in almost all senses of the word; there is something so cold associated with the word. Every time that I hear that word, a chill creeps down my spine. Especially when the execution is state sponsored, the chill actually becomes a cold for to know that my appointed protector, appointed to protect everyone in society from everyone in society has to go to the extent of ending someone's life to protect me.

I apologize again for I am digressing from the man. He hears the gentle tap on the door, the sound of wood hitting metal. It is the sound of the warden's wooden rod hitting the metal bars of his cell. It is light that a person in his sleep would not hear it. However, he has always remained a light sleeper and is instantly sitting up, all

thanks to the amount of time he has spent working out. I guess in a prison one has to be on their toes at every instance, be ready for a fight, for it is either you or them, there is no and involved. I generally have not been a big fan of people pumping iron and building muscle; however, he has had nothing to do and this was the best thing available to him.

The warden barely whispers, "The day has come. It is at ten today. I thought that that I would let you know so that you can be mentally prepared. Go back to sleep and I will come again at six, the usual time."

He smiles, sitting on his bed. Well it was not exactly a bed; it was more of a slab on the wall with space below to keep his plate. That was all that is left of his worldly possessions - his slab and his plate. The moment the word 'his' enters his mind, he smiles for he realizes that the moment that he is gone, the slab will belong to someone else as will the plate. He will leave the world the way that he came in, with nothing to his name.

He thinks of the warden's words - *the day has come*. In fact, they even told him the time removing all of the uncertainty that could ever be involved with the event; and what an event it was going to be. Close to the midday sun, with a few members of the force as audience, with a minister for support and the executioner at the controls. He grins, thinking of the money he could have made if only he was allowed to sell tickets to the event and finally breaks out into laughter thinking of what all he could have done with the money.

He tries to lie down; he tries to get some sleep. However, he is not able to even close his eyes for his mind is wide awake and yet there is nothing to do, no one to see, nothing to say; just the certainty of the uncertainty coming his way. He spends the next two hours just sitting there. I am not sure if he could have done anything other than that anyway. Just sit there, looking at the metal bars of his door. I am not sure if he was thinking for I lost him for most of the two hours. If I had to guess, I would hazard a guess saying that he is thinking about everything that had happened until this moment; for everything after this moment was not worth thinking about. Imagine this if you can, a moment when your reason is all that is left; but it has no power. That is the state that he is in now, reason rules over everything, everything is clear; everything is succinct; however, there is nothing that he can do about anything.

From the silence of the night, the loud and dull siren sounds out the start of another day of nothingness for the inmates of the prison. None of the inmates carried any means of telling the time. It was left to the prison to let them know the time to get up, the time to eat, and the time to sleep. Now it was time to get up. As promised, the warden appears at the door a few moments past the siren. It was a well-rehearsed ritual, the final few hours from the bed to the noose.

“Do not complete your toilet immediately today. There is a special breakfast for you today. Once that is complete, you can complete your toilet. We do not want you creating a mess once the hanging is done.”

Did I hear the warden right? Is he more concerned with the mess that might be created once the prisoner is hanged due to the relaxation of his sphincter rather than the prisoner being hanged? Could there be a bigger mess than the termination of a human life by other humans for the betterment of society?

It is then I understand the warden’s position. This is not his battle. It is the battle between the prisoner and the system. He does not have a say in the entire issue. The actuality of the situation is that he is but a puppet in the entire affair. He is trying to make the best of a bad situation. He is being kind not because he is required to, but because he can and over the years, he has seen it make a difference in the last moments of a prisoner’s life, a last glimpse of humanity from a society that has lost its belief in the prisoner.

The prisoner walks out of his cell and towards the common area meant for morning ablutions. The usual hustle bustle of the area is missing today. Everyday there is someone pulling some other person’s leg. Everyday there is some argument between two people. Everyday there are the big men who are the leaders of small gangs within the walls of the jail who throw their weights around, especially on the new prisoners and those who are weak. Today there is nothing of that sort. There is silence, there are stares, but there are no real activities.

He looks at the prisoners and he can see their emotions in their eyes. For once, there is no enmity, there is no anger, and there is no sense of being resigned to fate. There is just the solemnness of the moment, the fact that there is one of them, a person who lived among them is going to be executed today. He walks on, among them and then through them. There is no crowd at the bathroom, no fight to use the toilet. No one claiming his dominance over the taps, no line to stand in.

As he comes out of the wash region, the warden is there to escort him to the dining hall. He appears to notice that it feels strange entering into the dining hall alone. Usually, there is a crowd, a lot of din when the prisoners dine. The tough men are bullying the not so tough men to hand over their food. It is a case where even though the food is terrible, a man must eat. However, today the case is special. It is his last meal and the warden has decided that it must be a special meal.

He is made to sit down at a table near the entrance to the kitchen. There is a clean ceramic plate in front of him. There is a whole roast chicken, some Indian bread, a biryani, some curd in a cup, and a glass of buttermilk. He looks at the warden and

smiles, for he is not used to clean plates and he is not used to good food. Sadly, he is not hungry; he tastes the chicken, the biryani and drinks up the buttermilk.

The warden looks at him and asks how come he is not eating.

He slyly replies, "You were the one who asked me not to create a mess. If I ate now, then the chances of creating a mess are higher, are they not? Now that I do not have much in my stomach, I will go cleanly."

The warden has no reply, after a moment, recognizing the gallows humor involved, leads the prisoner towards the lavatory.

It is not correct to spy on a person when they are in the middle of their motions; not only is it incorrect, it is also unhygienic and plain vulgar. So, I shall wait until he comes out of the lavatory. I will leave you with a question what is the level of atrocity is required for man to give up faith in another man. I have thought about it a million times and I have no answer.

Just as he is coming out, the warden tells him, given his religion, there is a priest, a father from the local church, in the main hall, the one where they receive visitors. The prisoner does not comprehend the location for in all the time that he has not a single visitor. Given that lack of knowledge, he has no idea the place in reference here. The warden enquires if he would be interested in talking to the priest, if he has anything to say to a man of god for after all there is another hour before they have to be at the ground.

He says nothing for it seems that he has nothing to say. He just nods, for the mention of the time remaining seems to have struck a chord in him. It reminds him of a fast approaching vehicle. I have seen the same silence in the warden at times. The day before the execution, he is lost in silence, thinking of what his actions should be the coming day.

Walking to the receiving hall, the prisoner suddenly lights up, a smile crosses his face. He realizes that there is a long way to go, and there are many lifetimes to be lived in the two hours.

The warden leaves the room to give the priest and the prisoner some time. The priest is somber and stoic. I do not think that there could be anything else that the priest can be, for the event is monumental. At this juncture, I need to make some mention about the priest for he is going to be a part of our small group for another two hours.

This priest of ours, he is a man of god. He has a deep-rooted belief that the god above looks after everyone and everything on earth and does not neglect anyone. He

has just moved to our district and is the only priest in the vicinity. His masses are known to be full of fervor and is said to have moved many a man to tears. There have been claims that some have even seen the Lord thanks to the sermons of the priest.

I can remember the look on his face when he received a summons from the jail. With a dread in his footsteps, he walked into the jail a few days back. The warden received him and apprised him of the situation. The warden told him about our prisoner, the fact that he was going to be executed in a few days and if he, the priest would be willing to provide moral support in the last few hours to a condemned man.

On being informed, the priest was more than willing to be there on the final day. I think that it has a lot to do with the fact that he has just been ordained a priest and is full of enthusiasm. However, I suspect that he has never seen an execution and the opportunity to view one in person was a big motivating factor in his acceptance.

Therefore, his being stoic and somber, to me at least seems to be more of a façade for I am sure that he is quaking with excitement under those robes of his.

“Son, I hope you know what my purpose here is today,” he asks our prisoner with his deepest and what he believes is his most grandiose tone.

“Father, am I supposed to call you that? For I can see that you are such a child yourself, hardly a man.”

“Son, you can call me father, for I represent the voice of our father, the holy god and to him everyone is equal and everyone is a child.”

“Well then FATHER, honestly, I think that you are here today so that I can lay all my sins to rest with you and I can be executed with a clean conscience. I think that you are here to ensure that I get to heaven, even though I am sure that you think that I have sinned and that I deserve to fry in the heat of hell.”

The priest is taken back by the answer.

After what seems to be a few minutes, the priest replies, “Son, I do not know what to say, for I can sense something in you that will not allow me to hear your story. I will be honest with you, for to me that seems to be the only thing that has any hope of working. You are sentenced to be executed today. Lay yourself at the feet of the Lord and he will save your soul.”

“Father, what if my soul does not need saving? What if I do not repent whatever it is that I am being sentenced to die for? Then what is the purpose of your visit?”

Once again, the priest is rendered speechless. However, he will not be detracted from his purpose; albeit one that he has given himself.

“How is it possible that you do not have an ounce of repentance in you? Even though the warden did not tell me the details, I gather that you are to die today for you have taken lives. If it were me, the combination of the facts that I took lives and I am going to pay for that sin with my own would tear me apart from within.”

The prisoner smiles.

“Well father, I am not you. I do not repent for what I have done. In fact, in all the time that I have spent in this prison, all I have thought is if there was any reason for me not to have done the deed. I am not able to come up with one and I am at peace with myself. I have reconciled myself to the fact that I had to do what I had to do and I have to accept the consequences of my action. If society at large believes that my death would be punishment enough for my actions, so be it. There is nothing that I have to confess, for I have not sinned in my own books. If your Lord thinks that I have sinned, then I will talk to him if and when I meet him.”

In the face of such conviction, though not of the type that one would expect from a man on death row, the priest almost gives up on the conversation. He looks at the door through which the warden left, hoping that he would return. Seeing that there is no way out of this, a hole that he himself agreed to be in, he decides to talk about other topics.

“Son, are you not afraid to die?”

The prisoner laughs. When his laughter has died down, seeing the perturbed look on the priest’s face he goes on, “Father, I am sorry for laughing on your face like that. I find the question extremely funny for you are not asking me if I fear death. You are asking me if I love life so much that I do not want to let go. You are asking me if I am scared of the certainty of death, a certainty more certain than yours is, for I know when I am going to die, the place, the time and even the mode. Given your innocence, I will be honest with you father. I am petrified.”

“Why are you petrified?”

“Most people live their lives with the thought that even though they are going to die one day, they do not know when that day is going to come. They live under an illusion, one that protects their sanity. When the day that they shall die finally comes, it shall come as a surprise and it is over at a moment’s notice. Until today morning, I never knew the day that I was going to die. I was at peace. Ever since today morning, since I found out that it was at ten today I think of all the things that I have not seen and not done. The fact that I will not be able to do it petrifies me.

What petrifies me even more is that I have to wait for it. If there is some way that I can bring the time forward, bring it to the present, just to remove this unbearable wait."

"Son, I can understand what it is that you are experiencing. Nevertheless, remember that it is in the hands of God to decide when the time shall come. As far as your being petrified is concerned, life is all about the missed chances. It is more about the paths we took rather than the paths we did not. There have been a thousand times in our lives we have looked back and wished that we have taken another path, wished that we had done something else."

The prisoner laughs again.

"Pardon me father, but I am not sure if you know anything about the wait to die. I am sure that you have never given a thought about death and you are extremely happy to leave it on the shelf until the moment of death comes. And when it does, you will not even realize it for it shall have passed and you will be dead. And please do not start about the missed chances in life. I am sure that you have not had a chance to repent even a single event in your life. You are so young that you have had the good fortune of not having to retrospect. I do not want to sound brazen, but your looking back would involve more of what if I had this for lunch and that for dinner."

"But son, you just said that you were petrified."

"Father, we are talking about two different things. I am talking about what I have the capacity to do and not to do. You are talking about repenting what I have done. I am not petrified for what I have done. I am not petrified at retribution. I am petrified thinking that there are million things I have not done yet; a million things that I am not going to be able to do."

The priest does not answer. He does not counter the prisoner. I wish I knew why he does not correct, I do not know if he agrees with what the prisoner said, or if he feels that there is nothing to gain arguing a condemned man.

Skirting the topic, after a few moments' pause, the priest continues, as if he was neither insulted nor asked a question that he has no answer to, "What is it that you are going to miss my child?"

The prisoner is thoughtful for a moment.

He proceeds, "I have nothing to miss. What I have is something that I have always had, the things that I do not have are things that I have never had. I would be lying if I say that I am going miss something. When nothing is all that you have, I am not

sure if one can miss that. And as one has nothing, I am going to miss everything that I did not have. It is like asking me if I am going to miss conversation when all I had was silence, like asking me if I am going to miss my waking hours, when all I had was deep slumber. I am going to miss the silence, the sleep but not the conversations and the waking hours."

After a pensive pause, the prisoner proceeds, "I have spent all morning thinking if there is something that I have left undone and unsaid. Strangely, all I could think was that I wanted to get this day done and over with. I have been here for too long and done too many things, some that I wanted to, other not so much. However, there is not one thing that I would want to change, and if my life has led me to this moment here, so be it."

What does one say at a moment like this? Is there anything that can be said? Anything said is meaningless, for the person who is to be supported does not seem to need support.

The priest and the prisoner sit in the room and have nothing left to tell each other. They wait for the warden to come in. At the stroke of nine, the warden gently knocks on the door. Hearing no reply, he walks into the room. The scene he sees is completely different compared to the one that he expected. He thought that the prisoner would be in tears, repenting for his crime and that he would be crying to the priest saying that he did not want to die.

However, neither is the prisoner in tears, nor is the priest consoling him. They are seated in different corners of the room and are lost in their own thoughts.

The warden does not know what to say for a moment. Gathering his wits, he addresses the prisoner, "Do you both need more time?"

"No, what ever we have to talk has been talked. I am all yours now."

"If that is the case, then I guess that we better get going now. It is quite some distance away and we do not want to be late. Father if I remember, you wanted to stay along with the prisoner until we reach the gallows. Are you sure that you still want to accompany us? I can understand completely if you do not want to. It is not easy seeing another person die, that to at the hands of justice, no matter how right we think that it is."

"Son, you say that it is hard to see another person die, especially at the hands of justice. However, you have been doing it for so many times."

"Father, the first time is hard. Once that is over, you get used to it, you are desensitized. It becomes a part of your job and you tell yourself that it is not me, but my job that requires this."

Silence reigns for a few moments, for the priest is in thought. He then confidently replies, "Son, I want to be there this time. The ways of the Lord are many and if he has chosen me to be the prisoner, I want to be here until the end."

As they commence the walk to the gallows, the prisoner is in surprisingly good humor. For once, I exactly know what it is that he is thinking. As they start walking, he is thinking that he has a long way to go for there are three more prison blocks to go through. There is still the block where all the petty thieves are kept and that is actually a big block. So, it will take him at least five minutes to cross that. They anyway have to walk around the women's block that means another ten minutes. And finally, they have to walk through the field at the end of the prison. Oh, it will be a long time before they get to the field. He is happy for there is still a long time left.

However, time is fickle, and it has gone too soon. Before he realizes it, they are at the end of the field and the scaffold with its noose hanging from the beam in the center is visible.

As soon as the scaffolding comes into view, the prisoner's countenance undergoes a dramatic change. He, who was humorous until now, suddenly gets serious. He, who carried a smile on his lips until now, gets serious and is grim. I am blocked from his thoughts again. How I would love to find out what it is that is making him grim and somber. I would think that it is the fear of death even though he has made claims that he has made his peace with it.

Until the certainty manifests itself, it can always be rationalized and made peace with. However, when the certainty actually comes face to face, there cannot not be any qualms. Every human being is born with a drive to live, even exist. Death is never an option, even for those who commit suicide, it is not an option, and it is just the means to an end, the end.

Every step towards the scaffolding seems to be forever. The prisoner, the warden and the priest walk together, with the pace of the walk being decided by the prisoner in front of the other two. Every step is slower than the one before it. Every step seems to be an act to delay the inevitable.

There is a ladder to the scaffolding and just as the prisoner starts to climb the steps of the ladder, he stops and closes his eyes as a tear runs down his cheeks. His legs seem to go weak and he is immobile. Even though he might be at peace with the event, his body seems to have frozen over.

The priest, who has never left him all this time, sees the tears, does not speak a word. All he does is offer the cross on a chain around his neck to the prisoner to kiss. I am sure that in the face of inevitable destruction, like falling off a cliff with nothing to save you, one has an unbelievable urge to close one's eyes and wait, come what may.

Every time that the priest places the cross on his lips, the prisoner opens his eyes, and seems for a few seconds to come to life and he takes another step. Every time that the cross touches his lips, he makes haste to kiss the cross, as though in haste not to forget to provide himself with something in case of a need, something like a purpose when he has none; however, I doubt if he has any religious feelings of any sort<sup>1</sup>.

Slowly they reach the top of the scaffolding, the prisoner still being led by the cross, by the priest. Finally, as they come and stand under the noose, for one last time, the priest places the cross on the prisoner's lips and then the executioner covers the prisoner's face with the hood.

Everything goes black.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the text in the ending of the story is from *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky. It was the very thought, that the kissing becomes his sole purpose in his life, which moved me to set up a story along the same lines.