

A few minutes before...

by Avika Yadav

Little Boy, Bomb Detonated in Hiroshima.

I am a prized secret, only for my country to uphold. Rumours of me weave through many cities, to pervade people with veneration. To be used as a card against world leaders, to spark fear in the people. They think I am a figment of the imagination of many, a warning sign that shows physiological impairment.

But they will see.

I close my eyes and remember the emptiness scraping at my smooth skin, permeating the cracks in my armour. To a time where my existence was a minuscule particle in the endless ocean of schemes. There were plush carpets, and thick rugs, all suited for a throne bearer. I remember seeing the kinks in their armour, genuine emotion warping their faces as they read the warning.

My pilot looks at me now, pride, and fear coursing through their veins. The silence between us is thick, unspoken words dragging at his feet. The hum of the engines, steady and mechanical, seems to grow louder, but it does nothing to fill the chasm between us. The mission ahead is a promise we've made, a commitment to something bigger than ourselves, but it feels like it could swallow us whole.

His hands grip the controls a little tighter, knuckles white, but his eyes stay locked with mine for just a moment longer. There is something raw in his gaze, a mix of duty and hesitation, as if the weight of what we are about to do could bend him in half.

'What if we beat the Germans? What if we make the first atom-based weapons?' the words drag me through the mist of wires and smooth metal, transporting me to the past.

The idea grows, like a seed, into their minds. The next day is caught up in the swirl of planning, rushed phone calls and meetings. But once the idea has come, then there is only one ulterior motive - for my country to hold reign over people, for the spatter of innocent, pure blood to taint the minds of many, for decades to be. For a veil of darkness to descend on the city - so dark, so beautiful. To make the leaders of our rivals bend and bruise and buckle until they are no more: to surrender.

I taste the bitterness of sand years later, whipping against my smooth exterior as the gadget, another atom bomb, shatters - sharp, deadly, and unforgiving. My maker stands beside me, his hands shaking. Is he scared? Confused? Angry?

These ideas shroud me in a veil of confusion, so thick that I nearly miss the words from his mouth one month ago - 'Now I am become death, destroyer of worlds'.

'It's time, little boy' the pilot whispers through me, dragging me from the past, into my present. Into my glorious future.

Now those seeds grow into roots, now wrapped into knives as I descend the calamitous airspace, into the tumble of people awaiting my omnipotent glory.

It is time. I am ready.

Robert Oppenheimer, creator of atom bomb – 41 years.

My head in my hands, ruination eating at my face. Leaving nothing apart from the wreck that are my actions. I stood in my messy, tormenting, damaging lab in New Mexico, and felt a burning climbing my throat, into my headspace. My hands were nothing but weapons of hell, used for mass destruction. I screamed, the taste of regret so overpowering, so trying.

'What if we beat the Germans? What if we make the first atom-based weapons?' those mere words transporting me to a more innocent time, where war was merely gracious grenades and amicable artillery – but that moment, those mere seconds fused the first pieces of my weapon together. Fused the first of the end.

A sharp knock came to the door. I immediately stood, bringing one hand to my hair in a feeble attempt to fix myself quickly. "A message, sir. Marked urgent."

I reached out, my fingers brushing the crumpled paper already sensing the gravity of its contents even before unfolding it. For a moment, the room seemed to hold its breath, the ticking of a clock the only sound breaking the stillness. The servant quickly departed, leaving only the merest of traces in the plush carpet. My eyes quickly went back to the letter. The words reached out to me, spelling out things that were depicted in my nightmares – 'The atom bomb is being dropped at 8:15 Japanese time. Please attend the meeting provided to oversee the situation post the bombing.

8:15 Japanese time is 19:15 Eastern time. I checked my watch and stopped.

19:10.

I pushed this note away and stared. Stared until I got sick of the seconds slipping away from my mind.

I stand and push away any lingering thoughts. I stand and fix my hair, my crumpled my loose tie almost keeping deaths hold on me. I tighten it, knowing I deserve far worse.

I open my door, and walk over to the big, double-panelled doors, and I stop.

B r e a t h e.

Without hesitation, I open the doors and face the people within.

It is time. I am ready.

Harry Truman, President of America - 66 years.

I sigh and run fingers through my hair. My body feels run down, beaten after sitting for that long. My hands press tightly together, asking the lord for forgiveness - for the many innocent lives that will be

taken - in one of these many cabins aboard the USS Augusta. That all these lies, agony and bloodshed are necessary for the good of humanity, for the good of a safe, reliable and secured future.

And once again, my headspace is transported to another world, where war is a heavy situation, and death is a pressing matter, rather than normalised affairs that come as quickly as breathing.

‘What if we beat the Germans? What if we make the first atom-based weapons?’ the mere words become my anchor for the next years to come, my inspiration. But, in the end, this anchor will plunder and crush the millions below me, instead of the billions of people who would have been murdered if I hadn’t taken this step. But it feels wrong.

I can’t afford to think this way so close to the actual bombing. Yet, in the heavy air, I can feel a lingering feeling of regret and disappointment. Something about the time makes it even heavier in the moments that are getting closer to the time of the bombing.

The ship rolls and pitches beneath me, a taunting metronome marking off the endless ocean that separates me from this destruction. I get up from my seat, the weight of Hiroshima on my shoulders, and walk back and forth in the tight quarters of my cabin. There is the feeling of expectancy in the air, but there is also a terrible silence - a silence which mocks the storm that is raging in my heart.

I pause by the window, glancing out at the endless expanse of water. It’s strange how something so vast can feel so suffocating. I tell myself it’s for the greater good, for a future where such horrors will never be repeated. But those words ring naught, a delicate shield against the waves of doubt threatening to consume me.

As the minutes slip away, I close my eyes and take a deep breath, willing myself to find strength in the decision I’ve made. To find strength in me. The world is watching, and history will judge me - not by my hesitation - but by the resolve with which I carry this burden. And yet, in the quiet of this moment, I am not a leader or a decision-maker - I am simply a man, grappling with the weight of an impossible decision.

And when I open them again, I know now.

It is time. I am ready.

Unknown - 5 years.

My eyes scrunch at the drop of sticky cherry lollipop on my white coat, looking at it for 5 more seconds before licking it.

‘Sweetie.’ My mummy gives me a look before tickling me, also smearing the cherry cola bits of my lollipop on her red sundress. She looks at me, then we burst into laughter. Today is the best day ever!

Today, me and mummy woke up really early to go to the shops before they were crowded, and I had fluffy pancakes for breakfast, and they were so good! They are my favourite breakfast. I didn’t go to school because all of the people my age had ran away from school to the countryside because they are scaredy cats! But I am brave, I can deal with this war. But anyways, Me and mummy went to the Hondori streets, and I found a shiny bug with glowing eyes and green wings! I think it waved at me! And I picked a really red flower from the garden, and I put it in my hair. Pretty!

I got a lollipop which tastes like cherry cola. What even is cola?

But now we are walking for what feels like forever! I think we are trying to find some sweetcorn for dinner. Mummy says we are going to make it because it was daddy's birthday today, and he loves this food! Mummy gets sad whenever she thinks about daddy, but she tells me that daddy is on vacation and is with us forever. I think that means he's coming home soon. I really hope so!

We finally find the sweetcorn and walk out of the boring grocery store. I see a really tall boy, wearing black sandals and a dirty grey t-shirt walk out of the tailors, with a really pretty dress! I wish mummy would buy me that dress.

Outside, I see something cool! 'Look, mummy! It's a plane!' I giggle and show her. But she won't listen to me, she's busy tying my shoelaces for me. She looks up and sees the plane, and gives the sky a funny look, the one she gives me when I do something naughty.

She laughs, but it sounds weird. 'Darling, it's probably a fly' I pout. It's totally a plane. The sun is so bright today. Everything feels golden, like the world is wrapped in honey.

Mummy holds my hand tight. I don't know why, but her fingers press harder now, like she's trying to keep me here forever. Mummy looks at me, really looks at me, like she's trying to remember something that she needs to remember. Her eyes are soft and shiny and sad, like they look like when she talks about daddy.

The ground hums, the air is thick, and something is coming. I can feel it.

I look up. The sky is wide and blue. The plane is closer now.

'It is time,' she whispers.

I squeeze Mummy's hand.

'But... I'm not ready.' I whisper back, my words lost in the space between us.