

## Heartbeats

By Mohammad Khan

Pendulum clocks decorate the walls of a room. They undulate in a perpetual periodic motion. A grandfather clock sits in the corner of the room reaching halfway to the ceiling. A cuckoo bird erupts from the grandfather clock screeching.

Arya Begrenzte wakes up to the screeching bird. A sliver of sunlight blinds her eyes as she stands up and glances at her counter strapped to her wrist. 1,115,621....1,115,611.....1,115,605...1,115,595 and so on.

The room reeks of stale air and is sparsely decorated except for clocks. She brushes her disheveled auburn hair off her shoulder as she stands. She stretches with the flexibility of a gymnast and breathes deeply. Glances at the counter again. 1,115,535.

She begins a tai chi movement with the calm fluidity of water and the precision of a praying mantis. Her breathing slows. At the end of each movement, she checks the counter. 1,115,525. After a few more movements and calming breaths, her clock chimes 8 am. Class starts soon.

She looks through her barred window at the concrete jungle outside drenched in heavy rain. Millions of people walk with covers on the counters on their wrists. The skyscrapers tower above all as watchers of a camp. She enters the rain like everyone else and continues walking to the college. She looks at the sky, searching for a respite from the rain but finds none. The sky is trapped within the tops of the building and nearly impossible to tell if anything stretches past.

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Arya enters a lecture hall of tired, apathetic college students. The smell of sweat and soggy clothes traverses the humid room.

Behind her, written in large chalk. PHIL 5280 Metaphysics, death, and the meaning of life.

The students are distracted by their devices and a few scribble notes as Arya begins writing on the board. All students wear counters on their wrists, handcuffed to an invisible force.

“So when we last looked at Marcus Aurelius’s stoic philosophy.” Arya grabbed chalk and started writing stoicism in large letters on the board. She continued writing until a large crash from the hallway interrupted her.

She peers into the hallway and sees a collapsed student in the middle of a swarm. The bystanders stare, frozen as the collapsed student writhes from pain on the ground and eventually stops.

Arya glances at her counter. 1,115,465 and walks over to the student and begins CPR.

“Call 911”, says Arya calmly to a nearby student. They don’t move. She says it again more sternly and the student wakes up and quickly dials 911. As Arya continues CPR, she keeps a hawk’s eye on her counter and calms her breath.

1,115,405....1,115,345....1,115,285.

“Professor”, says one of the students pointing at the counter on the student’s wrist. The counter displays....4.....3.....2.....1....0. Arya stops CPR and kneels beside the student and hangs her head. The group of students stay around, bowing their heads. A few apprehensively check their counters before heading off.

The paramedics quickly arrive and whisk the student away and the swarm dies down as Arya returns to her class and continues teaching in a calm demeanor as the students struggle to write and listen from the adrenaline high.

1,115,165 says Arya’s counter.

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Arya returns to her secluded home near a running creek. The only evidence of civilization was her home in the enormous forest. The sky has no bounds as trees stretch for miles around her. The sounds of the creek mixed with the cicadas in the forest creating a constant ambience devoid of any modern sound.

Her home is filled with books that would take lifetimes to complete. She tosses her keys on a desk and grabs a drink. Stacks of papers fill the desk behind a partially closed door. In that room, awards and plaques cover the walls, a PHD in social psychology, Pulitzer prize winner, best selling author 5 years in a row, and an old woman sits in a lounge chair turning through the pages.

Arya pushes the door open more.

“Still don’t know why you limit yourself,” says the old woman. She peered at Arya through her bifocals as her bony hands turned the documents. No counter lives on her wrist. “You could live on the highest hill in the largest home in the largest city of the world if you didn’t.” The woman placed her bifocals on the table.

“You know me, mom”, says Arya leaning against the wall. “Haven’t changed.”

“What about the lecture in a small town this weekend? That’s a change.” She struggles to recall the name. “Taos”, she says, finally remembering. “Smallest town in the state. I heard they don’t have counters there.”

“I’ve done my research. Nothing surprising there. Small town with a community college. I’ll be fine”, said Arya. She sips her drink.

“I know. You’ve gotten better.” Her mom closes the documents and stands. “I was waiting to tell you this, but your father and I are moving out of the state. We’re going up north where the climate isn’t as hot.”

Arya stops and places the drink on the table. She breathes slowly. “When?”

“This weekend. We’ll have Cera and the grandchildren help. You needn’t worry.”  
Arya shifts uncomfortably unsure on how to process the information. She constantly glances at her counter.

Her mother catches her glances. “How many do you have left?”

Arya shows her counter. 1,111,565. The mother nods her head and walks past Arya leaning in the doorway. She walks to the front door and turns around.

“I wish I could be as brave as you. I could never wear it. I couldn’t bear knowing. But you’ve accomplished so much despite it.”

With that her mother leaves Arya alone in the home as the evening sunlight fades out.

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Arya drives to Taos, a small town in the vast desert a few miles past a fork in the road. A large fruitful green patch in the middle of miles of barren sand. Once you crossed into town, no traces of a desert remained. She breathed in a 4-7-4 inhale-exhale pattern. Occasionally, she glanced at her counter. 938,765.

Entering the town, she passes people outside all mowing their lawn or watering their garden. A few kids played in the water or in the street. Some carried sticks playing field hockey with a ball, others played soccer using a volleyball, while others ran around playing pretend. A radio playing from one house turned the street into a mini fair. Everything was a game to them. As Arya passed houses, a few people would stare at her like deer spotting something out of place. The unbounded sky stretched for miles in all directions.

She arrives at a beige hotel, Wu’s Way. It was only 2 stories.. The exterior would’ve vanished in the desert if

not for the urban greenery surrounding it. The desk clerk waited patiently for Arya. He wore a yellow vest atop a white dress shirt. She checks her counter. 938,645.

“Welcome”, said the clerk. “Did you reserve a room?”

“Yes under Arya Begrenzte.”

“Can I see some ID?” She passes her driver’s license across the counter revealing a counter cuffed to her wrist. The clerk hesitates.

“Is this ok?”

“Of course”, says the clerk amicably. He doesn’t look up from his computer. “You are free here. Which room would you like?”

“I had already reserved one. Room 20-”

“How about our presidential suite? Best view of the town. No extra charge.”

“What? No, I specifically reserved a room--”

“Excellent. We’ll help you take your bags up.”

Before she could speak, two hotel employees wearing the same yellow vests grabbed her luggage and carried it to her room.

Arya follows quickly behind, constantly checking her counter. 938,585...938,525....938,465.

She enters the same elevator as the employees. They converse casually as she tries breathing calmly to slow the counter.

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The suite had 3 bedrooms and 2 full bathrooms. The windows were not barred and revealed the open landscape of an urban town with a desert ocean surrounding it.

The employees gently placed her luggage in the room, bowed, and left quickly.

Arya’s eyes dart around the room, scanning for anything out of place. Like a mouse searching its area for predators and hiding at the smallest sound.

A knock comes at the door and Arya slowly opens it. The hotel manager stands holding a pamphlet.

“Good evening”, he said. “The Midnight Sun festival is tonight. The entire town’s coming. It will be on the main road. Please join us if you are available.” He hands her a card with flamboyant decorations with the main road decorated with lanterns and dancing people under a sun and moon.

Her phone buzzes with a reminder of the college lecture. She tosses the card in the trash and prepares for the lecture. She gathers her notes and leaves.

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Late in the night, Arya arrives at the hotel after her lecture. Her car sputters to a stop and rolls lazily to a stop, unable to start again. The hotel employee walks by dressed in a suit and fine attire for the evening festival. In the distance, the town square is brightly illuminated like a lantern in the dark.

“Having engine trouble”, asks the employee.

“Yeah, do you know someone who can fix it?”

“The manager can help, but he won’t be able to until after the festival. Maybe a few days afterwards if he’s drunk.”

“But I need to get back soon.”

The employee shrugs. “I’m sorry, but enjoy the festival while it lasts.” He walks toward the light emanating from the streets.

Arya walks to her suite overlooking the town. The bright square illuminates the sky faint sounds of laughter can be heard in the distance. She glances at her counter. 937,865. With one deep breath, she grabs her jacket and walks out to the festival.

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Lanterns decorate the awnings of shops and refurbished Christmas lights decorate the alleyways. No spot of darkness left on the main street and adjacent alleyways. Vendors line the walls as friends, families, and couples enjoy the musicians in the square. Music and joy filled the streets and seemed to emanate from everywhere, from the walls, from the ground, from the smiles of people.

Arya walks near the edges of the street watching the patrons laughing and dancing in fine attire. After wandering around, she finds an empty table on the left side in view of the street and near her hotel. A vendor walks by and hands her a drink. “On the house”, said the vendor. He walks back to his stand to handle other customers.

She leans in her chair switching between drinking and glancing at her counter. 937,265. A single incandescent light bulb swung gently in the warm breeze above her table.

“Can I sit here?” asked a man. He wore a plaid shirt and dark blue jeans. Arya nods and the man pulls open the chair. He leans back in his chair, his right arm lays on the table. Though they sit across from each other, they face in different directions. He sits angled to her with his shoulder between them. Arya stares past him with her chin resting on her left hand with her counter hidden beneath the table.

“You’re new here, right?”, asked the man. “How do you like the area?”

She continues looking past him and at their surroundings. “Oh, I’m not staying. I gave a lecture at the college. I was supposed to leave today, but my car needs maintenance.”

“You would’ve missed the Midnight Sun festival.”

“Why is it called the Midnight Sun?”

“The lights here reach the desert and in the night, it looks like a sun on earth. A light in the darkness.”

“Do you have these festivals every night?”

“No, but a few who live on the edge leave their lights on as beacons.”

Arya nods, listening intently and taking in the atmosphere. She glances around the street and checks her counter. 936,965.

“If you don’t mind me asking”, started the man. “Why do you wear one?” He ushered to her counter with a tilt of his head.

Arya turns toward him. She leans back and crosses her arms. “I like to keep track. Keeps me focused. You act differently when you know the clock is ticking. Why don’t people here?”

“Some don’t like the idea of knowing when it’ll all come to an end. They still have their counters, but they don’t wear them. Others don’t like the distraction it poses in their life. Like a metal heart valve, the sound of the valve opening and closing reminds them of their mortality. And it sticks with them like a plague. They can’t sleep or enjoy anything.” He faces her and rests both of his arms on the table. A counter strapped to his wrist.

“You have one too?”, she says. He shows her the counter. The screen is blank. “How many do you have left?”

He taps the screen revealing 0 beats. “When it first hit zero, I thought I was dead. But nothing happened. So we waited. People were trying to get me to fix it or get a new counter. But I didn’t want one. I felt fine not knowing. When I discovered this place, I moved here immediately.”

She laughs. “Out in the middle of nowhere?”

“The outside world doesn’t like our way of life so we split ways. Many people still have their counters but they don’t wear them. They joke that the outside world doesn’t like us because of our way of life. There’s no money to be made by the companies. I’m the only one whose counter reads 0. But I never tried looking for why, I’d probably be buried before I began digging.

“Why didn’t you get the counter fixed? Aren’t you afraid? Knowing it will end at any time. How can you live?”

“How can’t you?” retorted the man. “I live life the same as I did with the counter. I’m not chained to a timer anymore.”

She leans forward resting her forearms on the table. “But you could waste time doing something that isn’t fulfilling or worthwhile. And then it would be over and it would’ve been for nothing. Everything you’ve done thus far would’ve been for nothing.”

“It wouldn’t have been for nothing. Whatever happened has happened. There’s no going back, so saying that doing this thing or finishing that because you’ve come this far doesn’t matter. The time is already gone. So keep moving forward. And no matter how it ends, you can rest easy knowing you did your best. It’s not what you’re doing that matters in the end, it’s why you’re doing it.”

“And having a counter helps me remember why. I keep my reason in mind so I live with purpose and act with conviction.” She stops talking, realizing their conversation has traveled beyond their table. A few vendors listen with one ear while nearby festival-goers occasionally stare at them. The rest of the festival continues without care.

The festival quiets down as people leave for their homes in a drunken joy. The lanterns stay lit as Arya and the man bathe in the silence and the gentle warmth of the lanterns. She relaxes in her chair and breathes slowly. She checks her counter. 935,165.

“How many do you have left?”, asked the man softly.

Arya shows him the counter. “935,165 beats. I have a resting rate of 60 bpm on average.”

“So that’s 15,586 min...259.7 hours..”

“10.8 days or about one and half weeks left”, says Arya, finishing his thought. She returns to crossing her arms. “Not much time left, but never had much to begin with anyway because of my health. Breathing helps keep it close to 60, but it can change.”

“Well...hear me out”, begins the man holding his hand in the air. “Why let a silly counter make your decisions? When you’re perfectly capable of making decisions for yourself? Why go through all the constraints of keeping pace with a clock?”

She returns to scanning the surroundings. “My decisions remain mine. The counter keeps me focused. It’s a tool. Nothing else.” She turns away from him in her chair.

“But a tool can gain control over your life if you allow it. Knowingly or unknowingly. A tool itself has no power or purpose, but the person using it gives it the power. A hammer can build a house or bludgeon a person, but a hammer on its own is nothing but a wooden stick with a metal end. Why sign away your life to a clock?”

“For structure and clarity. Without it, I would be afraid of making the wrong choice. A wasteful choice. I don’t want to die before I’ve lived.”

“Maybe you haven’t lived at all”, says the man. He leans back in his chair. “Isn’t the purpose of life to choose what one does without an outside authority? To retain autonomy?”

“Not necessarily. Free choice does not mean the best choice. My choices are regulated under law. I cannot kill someone without consequence therefore I do not have any free choice. I have restricted free choices. My choices are determined by civilization and the laws governing.”

“Yet you willingly gave up your autonomy to a clock dictating how much time you have left. You’ve let the counter make decisions for you. If you cannot choose for yourself, then someone or something else will make the choice for you. You said you make fulfilling choices, but you will die regardless. Why live your life based on the whims of a clock when you have your own choices to make?”

The two sit in silence for a while. One by one the people returned to their homes, leaving the vendors on the two of them sitting at the table. The dark sky looms overhead, the stars are lost in the street lanterns. The vendors are quietly packing their stands. A warm breeze carrying grains of sand skirts across the table.

The man looks past Arya towards the desert beyond the town. “Are your decisions your own? Or are the counters perfectly engineered to enforce submission to temperate decisions leading you to believe you made the decisions yourself.”

Arya shifts in her seat. She rests her elbows on the table and crosses her arms.. “What do you want me to do?”

“Make a choice but for yourself”, says the man. “If you choose to keep the counter, then keep it. If you choose to remove it, then remove it. But make a choice for yourself based on what you want regardless of the number on that counter.”

She fiddles with the counter on her wrist and slowly unclips the counter revealing 934,265 as it fades away. She slides the device away from her.

“Now”, says the man. “What are you going to do?”

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Arya walks outside the hotel carrying her bags in the sweltering heat of the sun. She wears no counter on her wrist as she tosses her bag into the back seat and trunk of her car. The hotel manager works underneath the hood of the car.

“There we go”, says the hotel manager. He leans back from under the hood of her car covered in sweat with grease on his hands. “Sorry again for the wait. I wasn’t feeling good after the festival for a few days, but you should be good now. You’re also low on gas but I have some to get you to the next station.” He wipes the sweat from his brow. “I’ll have one of the employees bring it out for you.” He shuts the hood of the car.

“Thank you for your help.”

He nods. “I hope you had a wonderful stay ma’am. I’ll make sure to get the gas to you before you go.” He waves towards the hotel, ushering an employee to come. An employee lugs a red gallon of gas to Arya’s car and pours the remaining gas into her tank. The employee and the hotel manager. “If you need anything else, you’re welcome here. Take care now.” With that, they leave.

Arya enters her car and drives off. She rolls the window down embracing the warm wind of the desert as it passes through her car. The sunlight reflects off a shiny object sitting in her passenger seat. She quickly glances and sees the counter lying flat with the straps sticking upwards. With her free hand, she grabs the counter and straps it to her wrist. The number fades into existence. 675,065.

She arrives at a fork in the road and slows her car. The GPS tells her to take the right path but she remains still. No other cars in the distance. She steps outside into the sun. The fork diverges ahead of her and the town lies behind. The counter reads 667,865. The open sky above her and the arid desert around, Arya waits and ponders her choice.