The Pilot

I wake as the turbulence shakes me violently from my sleep. Squinting while the sun's unforgiving rays mock me, I look around as the indigo expanse of sky envelops the small metal cockpit I fly in. Once my vision sets, I discover a terrible, unanswerable question lingering…Who am I? My present, past, and name are unknown to me.

My reasoning escapes me as I descend into a state of panic. I grip my chest as my heart beats faster and faster and seems to want to burst out of me. Sweat beads into my eyes, stinging and blinding me for seconds that drag out mercilessly. A constant throbbing resonates throughout my body, pounding my head, searing my brain. I can't stop thinking: Am I going to die?

The prospect of a heart attack seems better than whatever I'm experiencing. I'd rather go out now than deal with my crisis of identity. What harm is it if a nameless man dies miles above everyone else? Just as that thought passes through my mind, I calm down slightly, still panicked, but I no longer believe that death might kindly resolve this situation.

I tell myself to just breathe. I focus on slowing my heart rate, masterfully doing so as if I'd done it countless times before. My legs, still slick with sweat, are locked underneath a metal seat belt made scalding by the brilliant sun that scorches through the windshield. I ease it to find a bit of comfort.

Then, I look around and catch a glimpse of my reflection through a mirror on a side panel. I quaver in dumbfoundedness as I realize that I am a complete stranger. I know I look back at myself, but I am entirely unfamiliar and frankly uncomfortable with the man who meets my gaze. I see his naval uniform, the panic-struck twitching of his face, and the sunken dark circles under his eyes.

Who is this weary soldier? No answers surface. Since I can't find out who I am by thinking alone, I turn to look for clues in my surroundings. I scan the cockpit surrounding me and see a red "B-2"on the top of the control deck. This sparks some sort of recognition that I'm speeding in a Stealth Bomber on autopilot, ceaselessly flying towards some unknown destination. Why am I in a *bomber?*

My heart sinks with a sudden interruption, an excruciating thought—am I headed to a destination or a target?

And then I see a small slip of paper on the floor marked by thick red writing:

Automated Detonation at 3:00 PM

That's why I'm on this plane. I'm supposed to drop a bomb, of unknown destructive force, on a target that I know nothing about. If not, the bomb will detonate aboard the plane and I will be destroyed.

Blindly kill countless others…or allow the warhead to consume me with certainty? I want to choose the selfless act, but I can't yet bring myself to that conclusion. I am nothing, but I still yearn for life, for answers. What is my value in this world if I'm just a sensory body with no memories, no experiences, no name? I just don't know. All that I know is this current moment.

Am I entitled to find these answers? Questions completely outweigh any answers, any truths that course through my blank and busy mind.

How much time do I have left to decide? A brown field watch on my wrist reads 2:57 and incessantly winds down towards the fateful deadline. In the next few minutes, I must make a choice that leads to my demise or defines the rest of my life.

Then the plane lurches down. I slice through the layer of silky gray clouds and continue hurtling towards the ground. However, the sleek bomber balances itself out with cold, calculated precision, and I really wish it hadn't. I wish I had no decision to make.

I look forward and see a modest skyline approach. I assume this must be my target. The plane flies slower now, but still runs true to its course.

2:58.

The first buildings pass under the wide triangular wings and give way to an expanse of a war-ridden town. Gunshots flash from all corners of the conflict, nearly every building desecrated by fire, steel, and blood. Melting, burning concrete. Glass skyscrapers reduced to shards and rubble. Smoke fills the ashy sky.

But the plane does not hover, no, it continues on away miles past the war-torn expanse and towards a serenely calm and beautiful row of streets. Who are the people that walk amongst these cobblestone avenues? I begin to imagine…

Below, a mother and her son walk home from school as he cries about having to wear a mask. She chides him; the government mandate aims to protect them because the smoky air around them is unbreathable.

I eye the *DEPLOY* button.

2:59.

Two streets over, a husband and wife hurriedly pack their belongings to flee the city. They aren't safe there. They plan to leave at dusk, under the cover of darkness, leaving their home behind them.

People fight, love, and die under the shadow of the plane that streaks by. Below, people live their lives, aware of the war but blissfully ignorant of the bomber stealthily passing above.

These people, while figments of my imagination, feel real nonetheless.

I know this, but I don't know what to do. I don't know what the soldiers fight over, what the purpose of all that blood and ruin is. If I drop this bomb, do I prevent future bloodshed or do I commit a cold-blooded murder of thousands? Is my vacant history one worth continuing?

As the last seconds wind down, I make my choice.

3:00.