

## A RACE AGAINST TIME

I believe that every person on Earth encounters, at least once in his or her life, a situation in which time is of essence and immediate action is required on his part. Will he rise to the challenge and return victorious? Will he crumble under the pressure and fail? Such moments tend to change that person's life forever.

My personal race against time began in the most unexpected of venues, a sunny Saturday morning aboard the Mediterranean cruise ship, the Victory. I was enjoying my summer vacation on board the ship with my family over the course of a week. During the third evening, I made the mistake of running down some stairs too fast and ending up losing my footing, tripping over my own feet and spraining my ankle in the process. Trying to ignore the pain shooting up my right leg, I hobbled towards the centre of the ship, where I hoped I would find the kitchen and an icepack to relieve me of at least some of my pain. When I arrived at the strangely empty kitchen, it took me some time to get the attention of a worker, as he was hunched over the kitchen's primary electrical breaker which controlled pretty much all the electrical appliances in the kitchen, from the overhanging tube lights to the fire-doors. When I finally did get him to look away from his work, he appeared stressed about the condition of the circuit breaker and demanded that I leave the area, as the kitchen had been closed for electrical maintenance. However, he took pity on my condition and walked me over to the freezer to take out some ice. We hadn't moved ten paces away from the spot, when the primary circuit breaker exploded in a ball of flame, instantly setting alight pieces of furniture that lay nearby. The kitchen was old-fashioned, and much of its interior was adorned with wood, rather than cold steel. We could only watch in shock as the fire grew to terrifying proportions before our very own eyes. We rushed over to the two fire extinguishers that hung on the adjoining wall, but we had waited too late and the foam proved to be no match for the monstrous fire that lay before us. We were forced up the stairs into the pantry, which was tightly packed with shelves full of food. The engineer pushed himself to the end, where we reached the fire-door, which opens automatically in the case of a fire. To our horror, however, we discovered that due to the electrical failure, the fire-doors were inoperable and the sprinklers refused to turn on. We were trapped in a small alcove above an abandoned, burning kitchen and nobody knew we were there. It was when I noticed the wisps of smoke creeping up from the stairwell that I realised the race against time to escape from the pantry and save my own life had begun. By remaining in the pantry we would both soon perish from asphyxiation when the smoke filled the room. We wouldn't

burn to death, we would suffocate. Based on the rate of the smoke entering the pantry I figured that we had about half an hour left to come up with a plan to escape. I realized we were both still carrying the fire extinguishers. I noticed that even when empty, the extinguishers were still heavy. Taking a step back, I swung the extinguisher at the fire-door, but inflicted no damage. Unfazed, I brought the extinguisher down one more time on the weakest part of the door, its hinges. This time a small crack appeared just above the hinge's centre. The engineer smiled hopefully at me, an indication that he understood what I was doing before we both started to work on the hinges. It was slow work. By the time we ripped out the first two hinges, I noticed that forty minutes had already passed. We dropped to our knees to find the last remaining reserves of oxygen before we set upon the final hinge. Dripping with sweat, with soot stinging our eyes and smoke filling our lungs, seconds felt like hours. The engineer coughed violently then collapsed to the ground and I was only seconds from joining him. I had participated in a race against time and I had lost. In this race there were not going to be any prizes for coming second. Just as I was about to pass out, I gave the extinguisher a final, desperate swing, and noticed the hinge flying into the air, and the heavy fire-door coming down with a crash. I only had the strength to drag myself and the engineer out of harm's way before losing consciousness due to sheer exhaustion soon afterward.

The fire didn't spread far. The smoke triggered fire alarms outside the kitchen and all was well after a few minutes. The engineer thanked me for saving his life, regarding me as his hero. Personally, I just feel lucky to have survived this life-changing battle against death and I now know I have the courage to face almost any challenge in life, having come out on top in my race against time.

*Somnath Sarkar*  
*Class X-B*