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Only Time Mattered

Edith Sookhai
Battle Creek Central

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Patiently the clogs and gears of the old clock ticked and turned. The alarm had been cocked to release at 6 a.m. Competing with the ticking sound was the heavy breathing of the uneasy sleeper.

Again the same reoccurring dream. He was running down a path. His lungs, burning, shouted for more oxygen. Straining and aching, his legs begged for relief. The green blur of the woods beyond looked comforting, yet too mysterious for relaxation.

He wanted to crawl into it and hide from those voices, but they just wouldn’t let him.

“Come on Sims. You’re in front. Speed up, they’re gaining on you. Run, Sims, run, keep running.”

Only this time it was different—another sound interrupted his dream. It began as a low siren and increased its pitch till all his other senses were drowned out, and a frenzied howl awakened him. He automatically reached out and braked the clock’s alarm. A frantic look at the two phosphorescent hands said the same thing they had for the past thirty years.

Grudgingly, he untangled his paunchy body from his sweat, dampened blanket and sheets that had vined around him during the night. Streaks of light reflected through the drapes, revealed a meticulously kept studio apartment.

His walls were of unblemished high gloss white and on them hung parallel geometric prints. The black ebony furniture, decorating the room had had its polish polished. Contrasting white walls and black furniture combined on the glazed tile floor.

The checkered tile pattern in the square room looked like an oversized chessboard. Furniture groups were arranged as precisely as pawns and queens. Indeed, occasional visitors, sitting rigidly on uncomfortable chairs would mention that fact with a nervous laugh. He would nonchantly agree and wish they’d be gone soon. Being an introverted loner, he hated guests. Besides, he was almost always too busy for such trivial matters as entertaining. His time had to be employed well, or he would become hopelessly backlogged. After all, he was chief accountant for Computers Inc., and much there depended on him.

After his habitual assuring look around the room, Sims began his prefunctory ritual. The morning duties of transforming his hide-a-bed-in-a-sofa and the bathroom ceremonies were almost
mechanical. He performed them mindlessly and perfectly as a robot.

The polished porcelain fixtures of the bathroom were barber shop white and heavily rounded. Gleaming chrome was as slick as silver. He could see his reflection, a bit distorted, over the sink. The commode, which he had just flushed, gurgled softly. It took half a minute to refill. Above the sink was a medicine cabinet, set into the wall and covered with a mirror-faced door. To its lower left was a toothbrush rack which held accommodations for six toothbrushes but held only one single Spartan brush, with strong bristles of plastic.

Carefully, he placed two fingers on the edge of the mirrored door and opened it. The bottom shelf contained most of the gear he needed for his morning’s preparations. A shaving mug, partnered with a matching inverted shaving brush, bristles up for drying, stood beside a tube of toothpaste, half gone, but rolled tightly from the bottom into a scroll. Next was some dental floss, Lysterine, and an astrigent.

On the second shelf, lying on brushed cotton gauze as if they were surgical instruments, were two pairs of small scissors, his finely honed straight razor, a pair of tweezers, a steel comb and a handless brush.

The third shelf contained medicinals; bicarbonate of soda, Vicks nose drops, and vapor rub, and two vials of prescription pills, one for his high blood pressure and the other a tranquilizer.

Barely reachable and rarely used, the fourth shelf contained unopened cologne and after shave—Christmas gifts from some venerable aunt who was possibly his last living relative, if in fact, she was still alive. Sims never used them because he preferred astringents on his aging skin.

Next was a small wooden box which lay there for lack of a better place. He had meant to discard it years ago. It had no practical use, but as he scrubbed, polished and toothcombed his apartment each Sunday, he would rub luster into the already burnished black box. It was a junkbox, his only indiscretion. It contained a tarnished bronze medallion with a faded blue satin ribbon which he had won in high school as a marathon runner and a cloudlessly blue marble, perfectly rounded. This was given to him by a former sweetheart, now married.

Sims reached up and took the box. Quite absently he stared at those sentimental items. He fondled his award with his well-manicured fingers; and as his glance met the front of the ribbon,
a tinge of excitement was expelled from his body. First time in years such a thing had occurred.

Quickly, nervously, he returned the box, wondering why he hadn't picked up his shaving instruments instead, and why he had wasted time day dreaming. “How unlike me,” he thought.

Shaving with a straight-honed razor was a tedious task he had learned to relish. He liked the smooth whispering sound of steel on leather as he stropped the razor. He liked the creation of warm suds in the mug and their application to his face. Shaving itself required a degree of ambidexterity and steadiness which Sims prided himself in.

But something was strangely wrong this morning, something was distinctively different. Perhaps a smudge on the wall? A book out of place...? The room was full of silence. Something was missing. He had forgotten to rewind the clock. The same ticking sound he had heard for thirty years was gone. He wondered how he had done it. Rewinding the clock was an immediate act he performed upon rising. But it was the only clock there, panic, a kind of disorientation struck him.

Sims dialed the time, synchronized his clock, and again wondered where he had gone wrong this morning, all in fifteen seconds flat. He was off schedule now so he would have to postpone some of the housework. Being late for work was unthinkable. He had never before in all 20 years.

He hurriedly showered and dressed in his blue jacket, white shirt, and navy blue tie and trousers. All this time, his desperate eyes never left the hands of the clock. I'll catch up the lost 15 minutes tonight, he tried to reassure himself. His heart kept giving him a sick flutter as he left his apartment in a race against time.