

## “Time Again”

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“Goddam daylight savings time,” McElroy cursed as he reset the antique clocks in his shop. Seven grandfather clocks, eighteen cuckoo clocks, an even dozen musical clocks, and an assortment of character clocks from Felix the Cat to Teddy Roosevelt ticked, tocked, warbled and bonged at 9:00 a.m. All gleamed with polish and fresh paint.

McElroy pushed his wire spectacles up his nose and looked closely at his hands. The knuckles were swollen and the fingers beginning to twist with a hint of the grotesque to come. They throbbed with the effort of twisting keys and winding springs.

“Time,” he muttered pushing wisps of white hair behind his ears. “I have so little time left, and they rob me of an hour.” He pounded a painful fist on the oil-stained workbench. “What right does the government have to take away my time?” Two red spots appeared high on his bewhiskered cheeks and his breath came in short ragged gasps. He clutched his right arm to his chest.

“Time. No time. No,” he whispered as he fell to his knees, knocking over a ceramic ballerina poised to dance.

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McElroy came to awareness. He moved – shuffled actually – in a line of people stretching across a flat, featureless plain. A low mist swirled around his ankles, but it didn’t feel wet. The temperature maintained that perfect balance between warm and cool that you don’t feel at all. He gazed, mouth open, at the people shuffling ahead. Old people on canes, skeletal children carried by adults with scabrous limbs, others with no visible afflictions.

He raised his hands to rub his face and drive the muzziness away. His hands. He stopped and stared at them until a large woman in a flowing dashiki bumped him from behind. He shambled on turning his hands palm up then back again. What was wrong with his hands?

No pain. That’s what was wrong. Or right. His hands were still swollen with beginning arthritis, but there was no pain. He patted his chest. He wasn’t breathing. He opened his mouth to scream but, with no air to work the vocal chords, his mouth just stretched into a tortured “O.”

“You’ll get used to it,” a voice chimed in his mind.

“Get used to what?” he replied in the same mental speech, then clapped his hands to his head as if trying to hold the thoughts in.

“To being dead,” the voice replied.

Then, McElroy heard the sound – a low murmur of thousands of voices – mumbling, singing, crying, and praying. The sound swelled and diminished like the waves of the ocean.

“Who are you? How did I get here?”

“My name’s Sheila. I don’t know how you got here but I died of AIDS.” A small dark hand with neatly polished nails cupped his elbow and steadied him when he stumbled. He looked down at an ethereally thin woman. She may once have been beautiful. Now her skin pulled taut over a glowing spirit. She grinned and gave him that universal sign of encouragement – thumbs up.

“AIDS!” He cringed away.

Her grin turned to a frozen mask. “No need to worry now, Pops. We’re dead. If you don’t want to talk to me, fine. I just hadn’t found anyone in our immediate vicinity who spoke English.” She surveyed the crowd. “Bye, Pops. That one looks interesting.” She drifted toward a dazed-looking young man carrying a motorcycle helmet; his head tilted at an impossible angle.

“Wait! Don’t leave me, Sheila.” McElroy grabbed the young woman’s arm. She pushed his hand away with surprising strength.

“Don’t touch me. No one touches me unless I let them, you hear?” If she were using speech, he’d be wiping a spray of spit from his face.

“I’m sorry, Sheila. I’m confused. Stay,” he pleaded. “Please tell me what’s going on.”

She looked up at his bent frame and frightened face. “Okay, Pops, I don’t know much more than I already told you. We’re dead. Someone said in Spanish that at the head of the line we get to talk to the gatekeeper – St. Peter if you’re Christian.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I suppose someone or something else if you’re not. No one could say what’s on the other side of the gate. I guess we’ll find out in time.”

Time. He pulled an antique pocket watch from his vest. 9:07. He jabbed a finger at the face. “It’s stopped. I was cheated. I should have another hour of life.”

“Yeah, and I should have had fifty more years. So what’s new?”

“No. I mean daylight savings time. It’s really only 8:07. They owe me an hour.”

Sheila's small frame started to shake with tremors. She put her hand to her mouth as if to keep in the laughter she couldn't voice. McElroy kept waiting for the gasp and high trilling giggle that never came.

"That's rich. You're owed an hour because of daylight savings time. How're you going to get it back? Demand it from the gatekeeper?"

His jaw set with a stubborn clamp. "I'm certainly not going to waste my time hanging around on this line. That hour was stolen from me and I'll get it back. I'm going to the head of the line. Coming with me?" He held out his hand.

She looked around at the slow shambling file stretching to the horizon then slapped her palm onto his. "Sure, Pops. I've nothing more to lose. Let's go." They took off at a slow trot, bypassing their vacant-eyed fellow travelers.

A discordant roar erupted from the constant murmur. Sheila looked back. "We're in trouble, Pops."

"What's more trouble than being dead?"

"A fat guy with a New York Yankees hat and a baseball bat is leaving the line. He was swearing. I caught something about 'fixing the ditchers.' I haven't felt any pain since I got here and I don't want to find out if it's possible. Let's move it, Pops." Sheila pulled his hand and started running.

McElroy glanced over his shoulder. The line disintegrated into a milling mob as more people followed the bat-wielding Yankees fan. Suddenly McElroy felt the ground tilt. He slipped into a violent vortex and lost his grip on Sheila's hand. Before he could open his mouth to scream, McElroy jolted to a landing on his hands and knees before a roughly carved rock partially blocking the entrance to a cave.

Sheila landed on her back next to him in a puff of gray soil. The beads on the ends of her cornrows clacked as she shook the dust from her hair. "Thanks for the ride, Pops. Where are we?"

McElroy stood up and brushed the dust from his trousers. "I don't know." He squinted at the cave entrance. A light began to glow around the edges of the stone door. Rays strobed across the dimness. Soon it was too bright to look at. They shielded their eyes.

"You wanted your cases expedited?" An androgynous voice chimed in their heads.

McElroy turned, trying to pinpoint the sound. He straightened his shoulders and folded his arms across his chest. "Who are you and why did you bring us here?"

“Some people have more life than others, even after death. You created quite a stir back there in the line. You evidently feel you have some grievance. It’s my job to listen and decide whether to grant your petition or send you on to the Oversoul.”

McElroy turned his back to the strobing light and addressed the mist. “I need to go back. I was cheated of an hour of time by the government when they moved the clocks forward for daylight savings time.” McElroy thought he felt laughter like butterfly wings brush his brain.

“That’s a novel excuse. ‘I’m too young.’ ‘It’s not my time.’ ‘You’ve made a mistake.’ These are the common themes. I’ve never heard ‘I’m owed an extra hour because of daylight savings time.’”

McElroy lifted his head. “Time is my life, sir, er, ma’am. I’ve always looked for the shortcuts, the efficiencies, ways to save time. I chose to work with clocks because they personify order and time. I’m owed another hour and I want it.”

“What did you do with all this extra time?”

McElroy pulled at his lower lip with his teeth and slightly tilted his head. “I...I studied. Clocks, music boxes, mechanical things that interested me.”

“Did you have fun, create something, help somebody?”

“I enjoyed my clocks.”

“I feel you still have some things to discover for yourself. I grant you one more hour of life.”

“What about me?” Sheila intruded. “I’m due another fifty or so years. Can I go back?”

“You’ve learned what you needed from this life and are ready to join the Oversoul, but I think you can help Luther. I grant you one more hour of life.”

“Luther?” Sheila turned to McElroy.

“My name,” he mumbled. “Luther McElroy.”

“Well, Luther, what if I just continue calling you ‘Pops?’” She linked an arm through his and said. “One hour is better than none. Let’s go.”

The world dissolved in a more civilized manner this time. McElroy came to awareness sitting in a hospital room listening to the soft sobbing of a boy, about ten, punctuate the labored breathing of a figure on the bed. Somehow he had expected to be returned to his clock shop. He glanced at his watch. 9:08.

“Mom? Mom, talk to me,” the boy wailed into his arms.

“I’m right here, little man. Momma’s still here,” a feathery voice breathed from the bed. A dark well-manicured hand reached out and patted the boy’s head.

McElroy gasped as he recognized the hand.

The boy turned and started when he saw McElroy. “You’re not a doctor. Who are you? What’re you doing here?” He backed up to the bed sheltering his mother with his body.

Sheila turned her head to look at McElroy. She had an oxygen tube at her nose and an IV in her arm. “Well, Pops, you look like death warmed over. I thought it was a dream. I sure didn’t bargain for another hour of this life.” She closed her eyes to rest for a moment. “Josie, love, go to Grandma and Grandpa in the waiting room. I’ve got to talk to this man. I’ll call you back soon.” The boy picked up her hand. She pulled it away and patted his cheek. “Go now, Josie, do as Momma says.”

The boy edged past McElroy giving a final glance to his mother. “Call if you need me, Mom.”

McElroy walked to her bed and took her hand. It was dry and feather-light. She opened her eyes again. “Do you remember the gatekeeper, Pops?”

He gave her a lopsided grin composed of equal parts happiness and pain. He was shocked seeing her bright spirit dimmed by her feeble body. “Are you all right, Sheila? Are you in any pain?”

“The pain is bearable, except for right here.” She gestured toward her heart. “Josie is so young to be an orphan. What’ll become of him? My mom and dad will look after him, but they barely make ends meet.” She stopped to get her breath. “It’s tough on kids these days. They need so much and it’s so easy to get it on the street.” Huge tears slipped down her cheeks and glistened in her hair.

McElroy had no answers. He sat quietly for several minutes, thinking about his own mother raising him and his four sisters alone. He remembered her hands, red and cracked from taking in laundry. The lined face framed by prematurely gray hair was hard to picture after so many years. But the sudden terror of being “the man of the house” when she died of TB compressed his chest and dried his mouth. He had just turned thirteen. The next week he apprenticed to a clock maker and fell in love with the ordered precision of timekeeping as an antidote to the chaos of life.

Tears slipped down his cheeks. He dashed them away then gently returned Sheila’s hand to the bed. He watched quietly while she seemed to sleep. Sheila was right. Josie was going to need help. His grandparents could provide the emotional support, but a little money would make a big difference, maybe even make college possible.

McElroy thought of his empty life - his sisters dead; his nephews estranged. His family didn’t need him anymore, but he could help Josie if he worked fast enough. His adrenaline went into

overdrive. He looked at his watch. 9:29. Twenty-two minutes gone! How could he have wasted so much time?

He gently shook Sheila awake. "What's Josie's whole name, Sheila? Where do you live?"

"Josiah Tucker. We live on East Livermore."

McElroy rummaged for a pen and paper in the litter of her dresser stand. "Where on East Livermore? I'll need the whole address."

"Eleven fifty-five. Why?"

"I might be able to do something for your boy, Sheila, but I don't have much time. Only thirty-eight minutes till we have to go back."

A tired smile turned up the corners of her lips, but her eyes looked sad. "Don't worry about the time, Pops, there's nothing you can do. We're not your responsibility. Go do something fun for your last thirty-something minutes." Her eyes closed as she continued in a faint voice. "Get out of here. Get some ice cream, kiss a woman, or go smell the flowers in the solarium. Good-bye, Pops. See you at the gate."

He patted her hand. "I'll send Josie and your parents in."

She tucked her chin in a semblance of a nod.

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"What do you mean 'he's unavailable?'" McElroy shouted into the phone. "That ambulance chaser is always available. Is he out of the office or won't he take my call?"

"In with a client! I didn't think anyone was stupid enough to have him for a lawyer but me. Listen Ms...Kelsey? This is an emergency. I need to change my will in the next twenty-seven minutes. Tell that no-good nephew of mine I want to talk to him now."

"Don't 'Now, Uncle' me, Herbie. You don't care a fig for me and never have. The feeling's mutual. You and your cousins are heirs to my meager fortune because I never had any interests outside my clocks. You're all comfortable. I want to leave my estate to someone who needs it - to whom it will make a difference..."

"I always knew you were a selfish bastard, Herbie, but you were cheap, so I overlooked it. No, I won't come down to your office. I don't have time." McElroy crashed the phone back in its cradle.

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“Where are the lawyers?” McElroy asked a pretty redheaded nurse at the floor station.

“What?”

“The lawyers. You can’t have a hospital without lawyers hanging around. Where are they?”

“Mister . . .?”

“‘McElroy’ and hurry up. I’ve only got eighteen minutes left.”

“Mr. McElroy. We don’t have any lawyers ‘hanging around’ as you say, but I can send you to Administration. Maybe they can help you.”

“How long will that take?”

“Only a minute while I call.” The nurse watched him out of the corner of her eye as she called Administration, murmuring softly, finally turning away from him.

“They’ll see you on the sixth floor in a half hour, Mr. McElroy.”

“Not good enough, Nurse...” he glanced at the name plate on her uniform “...Franklin. I’ll just go up there now.”

“You can’t do that!”

McElroy headed for the elevator.

A prim Asian man waited at the sixth floor elevator door. “Mr. McElroy? I’m Mr. Yao. Can I help you?”

“I need to find a lawyer. I’ve written a codicil to my will,” McElroy waved a page of hospital stationery in Yao’s face, “but my bastard nephew will probably contest it. I want a lawyer’s advice and I only have,” he glanced at his watch - 9:50 – “sixteen minutes left.”

“Sixteen minutes left before what, Mr. McElroy?”

He opened his mouth to say ‘before I die’ then blurted, “Never mind. Here, sign this. I need two witnesses, too.”

“I’m not sure I should.”

“Sign the damn thing. You can read it in thirty seconds. ‘I leave all my worldly possessions, etc., etc.’”

Yao backed away from the pen jabbed at his chest. McElroy followed. "Sign right here. He trapped Yao against the reception desk. Yao took the pen and signed. "You too." McElroy turned a wild-eyed gaze on the middle-aged matron staffing the desk.

She deliberately turned from her typing, folded her hands and raked McElroy with an icy stare. "Young people these days may get away with that tone of voice, but I expect better manners from a man of your age."

He mentally counted to ten - very fast. "Excuse me, ma'am. My haste did get the better of my manners. Would you please sign this document? It's a simple will and I need two signatures from witnesses."

She held the page out with one hand and adjusted her glasses down her nose, her lips moving slightly as she read. McElroy felt the tension growing in his neck as she took her time. He wanted to throttle the woman. "It seems harmless enough. I'll sign." She reached for a pen and signed her name with a flourish.

"Thank you," he glanced at the will, "Mrs. Deboise. Now where can I find a lawyer?"

"Our hospital attorney can meet with you in twenty minutes. I'm afraid Ms. Hiranandani is in a board meeting till then." She seemed to take some small pleasure at giving him the bad news. "If you can't wait, try the emergency room. There are usually a few hanging out in the detox area." Her plump lips turned up into a poisonous smile and she turned back to her typing.

McElroy checked his watch. 9:57. Nine minutes. He saw the discreet sign "Board Room" down the hall on the right just past the restrooms. He quickly ran down his options: crash the board meeting or go down to the ER. Yao stood by the reception desk, fiddling with a stack of papers and watching him. A beefy guard sat outside the Board Room. McElroy headed for the elevators.

He nearly screamed every time the car stopped and the doors haltingly creaked open to let someone on or off. He fiddled with his watch mumbling, "I should've taken the stairs." At last he landed on the lobby floor and rushed to the emergency room. He ran down the hall, crashing into an orderly with a tray of urine specimens.

"Hey!" the young man yelled as glass smashed to the floor, slopping yellow liquid onto his shoes.

"Sorry." McElroy threw over his shoulder. "Only three minutes left." He careened around the corner yelling, "Quick. I need a lawyer!"

The telephone banks emptied and three people got up from gurneys. McElroy stood stock still as a mob descended on him waving business cards and crutches. "Probate," he screamed over the din. Most of the crowd peeled off, grumbling. Of the remaining five, he jabbed his finger a short man with a five o'clock shadow on his bulldog face. The pugnacious lawyer reminded McElroy of Richard Nixon. "You, Mr..?"

“DeSilva. At your service, sir.” He proffered a cream colored, heavy stock card. Nice quality.

“Mr. DeSilva. Over there.” McElroy headed to an empty bench, thrusting the will into DeSilva’s hands. “I haven’t much time. I need you to be the new executor of my will. With the insurance and the value of the antiques, I estimate your ten percent will be about \$15,000. Your job will be to hold off my greedy nephews and make sure that the rest of the estate gets to the boy named in this will. He needs it. His mother is dying. Here, let me write your name in as executor.” McElroy grabbed the paper back and scribbled DeSilva’s name at the bottom.

“Whoa, Mr. McElroy. You didn’t mention that this might be contested. That might eat up this small estate in fees before it gets settled.”

“Just tell my nephew, Herbie Snyder-“

“Stinky Snyder is your greedy nephew? I’ll be glad to shaft it to him any time I can. The bastard represented my wife in our divorce.”

McElroy looked at DeSilva in amazement. “Well, Jung said ‘There are no coincidences.’ Just tell Herbie this represents my dying wish and his refusal...” Pain ripped through McElroy’s chest. He gasped, “...to help brought on my...fatal heart attack.” His vision darkened as he fumbled for his watch. The minute hand ticked over to 10:07. Strong arms held him as he slumped on the bench.

“Mr. McElroy! Help! This man is...”

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Thin arms held him as he sat in a puff of gray dust. A light strobed across his vision.

“How are you, Pops? Did you get to kiss a woman?”

He leaned down and lightly kissed Sheila on the cheek. “I have now. How are you, Sheila?”

“I got to say a proper good-bye to my boy. That’s better than the last time. I’m ready. Somehow I know Josie will be all right.”

“He will be.” The rock rolled away from the entrance of the cave.

Sheila stood up. She seemed to burn with an inner fire, her spirit finally consuming her earthly image. She turned to the light. “I’ll meet you on the other side, Pops.”

A sense of peace and finality settled over McElroy. He stood, gave his pants a final dusting and followed Sheila’s glowing form into a place of timelessness.

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*Author's note: My grandfather used to complain each year about daylight savings time and how the government stole an hour from him each spring. He was attuned to the rhythms of the sun and the seasons. Artificial constructs like daylight savings time were silly government schemes that made no sense to him. He also didn't believe we landed a man on the moon, but I loved him anyway and missed him terribly when he passed on at the ripe old age of 92.*