

Telling Time

by

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“What do you pack when you have four minutes to leave?”

That wasn't the only question Mark Grayson asked himself as he sat, despondent, on the side of the bed with his head in his hands. “How could this have happened?” he lamented out loud to the empty room. “I should have over an hour. Four minutes, four lousy minutes; I'll never make it! How could I be so stupid?” He studied the floor for a few moments then lifted his gaze to the open suitcase lying on the cedar chest. His jaw tightened; he drew in a deep breath as his eyes grew sharp. “Yeah. I think I can do it. I have to try. I got to give it my best shot,” and he sprang into action.

He grabbed his shave kit and tossed it into the suitcase as he rushed to his closet. His dress shirts were arranged by color; he quickly snatched two freshly starched white ones and a blue oxford button-down. His slacks were organized by color from light to dark. It took him only seconds to grab a khaki, gray, and a dark blue pair, all of which were heaped into the suitcase followed by two randomly seized ties and a pair of oxblood loafers. Working feverously, a handful of socks and an armload of underwear were piled into the case.

He quickly dressed into clothes laid out the previous night, and, breathing heavily, fumbled through his dresser drawer, grabbed a passport, and stuffed it into his sports coat. “I can do it. I can still make it,” he told himself as he tossed his briefcase and suitcase into the backseat of the

car. He checked his watch. “Eight minutes. OK. I planned an extra fifteen so I got seven minutes extra. If I hurry and if I’m lucky, I can still make it!”

Mark drove like a madman doing 50 mph through the 30 mph, pre-dawn, sleepy, neighborhood. He hoped and prayed there was no early walker or jogger then he cursed his stupidity as well as blamed others for his predicament during his frenzied race to the airport.

“Why do they change the clocks in the middle of the month? And on a Sunday! That means you change the clock on Sunday night for Monday morning, doesn’t it? That only makes sense! But why do they change them at all? Who makes those decisions? Damn them; damn them all! And me too. How could I have fouled that up? It’s just like me, screwing up again. Today of all days. Just when things looked good. Damn, damn, damn!”

Mark was right about one thing for certain. He had a penchant for having lapses in judgment, common sense, and proper behavior at crucial times. As a teenager, he was constantly in trouble; he always seemed to pick the wrong friends, and, gullible Mark, easily succumbed to their misguided peer pressure. That led to more problems including two rounds in Juvenile Court, one for shoplifting and the other for car theft. As an adult, he flirted on the edges of law-and-order amassing numerous misdemeanors for passing bad checks, petty theft, and various traffic violations. When it came time to decide between right and wrong, he usually chose wrong. He also seemed to be cursed with just plain bad luck. Today was no exception, just when things looked good on the horizon.

The day had promised a much-needed new start. Mark had schemed cleverly in the past months to forge a new identity. He felt like a new man with a clear clean slate and he vowed to keep it that way. Mark Grayson was a different person. This job promised him a new start. He’d be working

in a foreign country without any past prejudices, contacts, or history interfering with him. This was his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that now dangled precariously from the hands of the clock that had sprung ahead by one hour.

His final interview was scheduled in London for the following morning. The job hinged on a positive reaction from the company president and, the one thing Mark was good at, was making a good initial impression. He was smooth, articulate, handsome, friendly, and thoughtful. That had served him well in the past, talking and charming his way out of trouble and penalties, even jail time. The interview was a formality. He was certain he'd ace it... if he got there.

His nerves were on the ragged edge as he ran the first red light. On the highway, he went 20 miles above the speed limit but was careful not to weave erratically in and out of traffic lanes. At the stoplights, he pounded the steering wheel and blew the horn immediately when the light changed; he then powered his way past other cars when any daylight was available between them. His heart was racing as he neared the airport. A quick time check revealed precious little time remained, but he forced himself to believe he could make it. He yelled at the slow-moving gate at the parking lot entrance but then good fortune turned up. A car was backing out right near the doorway to the terminal.

Mark grabbed his suitcase and briefcase and ran as fast as he could across the walkway and down the escalator to Ticketing. He shoved his way through the line apologizing and yelling that he had needed to catch his plane. As he pressed his way forward, a sharp-eyed, young blond agent saw him and, to avoid further disruption, called out.

“Over here, Sir. I’ll take you over here!”

The line parted and Mark, sweating profusely and out of breath, held up his phone and pleaded. “London... plane to London. Need to get on. Must... get on. Please help.”

The Service Agent looked at the ticket image, then up at the board behind her. Turning back to her computer, she bit her lip and punched in some info. Her brow remained furrowed as her eyes darted back and forth across the screen. The few minutes of silence were almost more than Mark could endure. Suddenly a smile broke across her crimson lips.

“You’re in luck, Sir. The plane is in a short delay due to refueling. We’ll be able to get you on it!”

Mark leaned heavily on the counter and a slow smile crossed his tight face. He let out a deep breath and looked to the sky and silently thanked God.

While the young agent busied herself checking his luggage, Mark was suddenly light-headed, not just from the rigors of the morning, but because he hadn’t had anything to eat since last evening. His body was rebelling even as he tried to comprehend his turn to good fortune. Not thinking, he picked up his briefcase and turned to leave when she stopped him.

Smiling, she politely asked, “Sir, I need to see your passport and check your luggage.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I’m sorry!” Mark shook the cobwebs from his head and handed her the passport.

As she verified the data, she again bit her lip and then turned pale. “Excuse me, Sir. I’ll be right back.”

Mark watched her go into a back office and consult with another agent. He felt his stomach churn and his mouth became uncomfortably dry. It seemed an eternity before the young girl returned; with her was a matronly, white-haired, heavily made-up Senior Service Agent.

The woman flashed an insincere smile as she strode to the computer. “No need to worry, Mr. Grayson. It is Mr. Grayson?”

“Yes,” Mark replied and suddenly became wary.

“Ah, yes. I see that now. The computer’s giving us a little difficulty.” She tried but failed to be a little light-hearted and again flashed that insincere smile. “I think it’s the time change. Just a little balky this morning. Don’t worry. I’ll get it sorted out. Meanwhile, I’m just going to call the gate and make sure they don’t close it before we can get you on board. Be right back.”

There was that smile again and Mark’s stomach knotted. He began to take deep breaths and repeatedly ran his hand through his bushy brown hair. His eyes flitted about the terminal but stayed focused long enough on the older woman to see that she was on the phone. The tension and worry eased slightly but then, as the minutes wore on, increased even more.

He walked in tight little circles within the check-in counter and kept rubbing his face and hair. He began to feel sick. He tried to make eye contact with either of the two agents but failed. If they did catch each other’s glance, they would give a slight smile and turn away. Mark was becoming increasingly agitated and distressed as the minutes wore on. He was staring back and forth between the flight information board and the office of the matron; the young girl had suddenly disappeared. He then noticed that things were unusually quiet behind him; he immediately became alert.

Just then he heard a strong, deep male voice behind him. “Mr. Grayson; or should I say, ‘Mr. Grainger?’”

Mark's knees weakened and he began to wobble. He felt like vomiting. He steadied himself on the counter and, through worried eyes, peered at the Sheriff and three other policemen standing in front of him, hands on their revolvers.

"You are Mark Grainger?" the Sheriff commanded. Mark weakly nodded. "Then you are under arrest for forgery. Read him his rights, Boys"

Mark never heard the words. They were just echoes from his past that didn't require his attention. He gathered enough strength to stand upright as they handcuffed and lead him through the same line that he had jostled through earlier that hour. At the curb, as they pushed down on his head to get him into the police car, he found his voice and asked. "How did you find me, Sheriff?"

The big man turned and looked at him in surprise. "You don't know?"

Mark shook his head.

The Sheriff took a pinch of snuff and stuffed it under his lip and stared at Mark. "You've been on our radar for some time, Son. I got to admit, that took some doin' to bilk old Jefferson out of his money, some \$150,000 worth!"

"It was \$75,000," Mark adamantly retorted then realized he had just incriminated himself. He twisted and squirmed in his seat and tried to kick the seat back but couldn't. Frustrated he fell back.

The Sheriff smiled broadly and just nodded for a few seconds.

"Amount don't matter. That ornery old man would chase you down for a dime. Point is, you did a good job drawin' up those bills of sale, forging them checks and other documents. Very believable! But you made a few mistakes. Can't tell you what they were, not now, but you'll hear

all the evidence soon enough. So you see, we was on to you almost right away; then you dropped off the radar. Couldn't find you! Figured you skipped out. But we kept lookin'."

"So, how did you find me today?"

The Sheriff let out a big belly laugh. "Ha, ha ha! You really don't know, do you, Boy? Well, if that don't beat all! Your passport. You handed the ticket agent your passport with your name and picture – Mark Grainger." He laughed and continued. "You booked the ticket as Mark Grayson. I thought I had heard everything, but this was a new one on me! You gave yourself up!"

Mark slumped into the backseat. His stomach turned and churned; his head bowed to his chest, he drew his knees up and his eyes filled with tears. His thoughts turned to the morning.

"Four minutes. I tried to think of everything I needed to pack with four minutes left. I remembered my passport but just reached in the drawer. I grabbed the wrong one; the old me; the one I was going to leave behind. I never checked. Four minutes, daylight savings, and my stupidity! I'm doomed. I might as well accept it. I'm dumb and doomed."

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Within weeks, Mark Grainger's new home was the infamous Huntsville State Penitentiary. He pleaded guilty of forgery but appealed to the judge and prosecution using his charismatic personality in hopes of gaining a reprieve but his checkered past caught up with him. The judge reviewed his history and promptly sentenced him to two years. Mark would be eligible for parole within a year. While he strived to be a model prisoner, Mark wrestled with past demons. As his parole date neared, his mind blurred again between right and wrong. "I think I'm gonna jump parole right away. I know I shouldn't do it.

But, boy, there's a big part of me that wants to give it a shot."