

## The Timebroker

A short story.

Liam Knoll banged the glass face of his watch on a beveled mirror in his own bathroom. It had stopped short. Just like that. The small, delicate hand on the four and the thicker, mightier big hand on the eleven. Well, that wasn't right. This particular watch wasn't to stop until Midnight. What was he paying for?

He accidentally put two lines on the face, one big and one small, like cat scratches. Not even a tick. He dis-belted the watch with little dexterity; his arms weakened as though they had weights strapped to the tops and bottoms. The kind of weights he used to pompously lift. He was never an athlete, no. Nevertheless, he bore an impressive physique, not the brittle bones of late. It was as though his body had been left in the sun and dried stale like a pumpernickel loaf. His eyesight had become a constant game of trickery taunting him with shadows in his peripheral that only sometimes existed. Then the aches crawled right beneath his eyes and skin and bones and muscle and took residence. The aches multiplied with Cancer cell-like rapidity.

He clutched all the places that hurt as though he was holding them in place. As though his spleen would just give way from the puzzle of his body and that would be that if he let go of his ribcage. And he was only forty-eight...

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Still nothing. Liam was all too tired to get up and search for a working watch. It had taken him exactly one half hour to reach the bathroom, almost half an hour at least, since that was what he paid for.

He wore a newsboy cap crooked and unsnapped under which grew a healthy mess of hair. A tangled knot made of knots and wisps of fast-turning white. Each hair behaved as though someone spooked it, sharply shocking the protein out and then Poof! Lifeless wires.

Liam had tried running a tortoise shell comb through the scene atop his head. He lost. So with a steady shake of his right hand, he made the call that he made twice daily now.

Three rings.

“Hello?” a voice barely touched the other end, like a feather. It was surely someone who didn’t want to be heard. Someone who just looked in both directions before he answered.

“Emit,” Liam was startled now by his own voice.

“Yes Liam, what is it?”

“My watch stopped right in the middle, or maybe it was nearer to the end. I didn’t even make it over to the hospital yet,” Liam said.

“Mr. Knoll—” Emit began.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Knoll, when you first became my client, who did you say referred you?”

Emit asked.

Liam had to take an honest minute, one un-purchased block of sixty seconds, to recall.

“Ms. Kinsley. Yes. Definitely. Ms. Elaine Kinsley,” he said. “Do you still speak with her?”

“Sure, it’s Dr. Kinsley now but yes.”

“That’s right—the MCAT’s,” Liam nearly yelled, so proud of his memory. “With all due respect Emit, but what does this have to do with my broken piece?”

Emit cleared his throat. He then continued to clear his throat. It became obvious he was word searching.

“How do I put this,” Emit asked himself.

Liam began to get impatient. This was his free time after all.

“Did Ms. Kinsley inform you of the warnings, the side effects? Or did you perhaps read the label I placed on your very first watchbox?”

Liam had to think back. He had to think back years. Years? His life rewound and unraveled. A quick wave of nostalgia, a slide of incomplete pictures, notes played backwards, strings untuned, some faces blank but the owners known...all the way until he reached Grand Diner on 7th Street. A man with a rag shaking his arm over a spotted window. An uneven table propped by a crushed pack of Camels. Candy apple red leather seats with off-white fuzz sprouting behind a loose button. A sticky menu and a gum-wadded table. Salt. Pepper. Salt. Pepper.

That’s where she sat. Right above where his eyes shifted from salt, to pepper. Her hair more like a lipstick shade in a swept bob. She had bags beneath her eyes, maybe she hadn’t slept in a week. Her skin nearly translucent.

“Listen Liam, I’ll be frank,” she nearly mouthed the words without audio.

“It gets addicting,” she said and chuckled. “I’m serious it does.”

She nodded wide eyed and continued. “Look, I was a skeptic too, but who would not try? I mean, it’s med school Liam, it’s the MCATS. If this kook says he can sell me three days, I’d damn near sell my soul for three more days to study. Of course, it starts out innocently, but then you need an hour for the laundry you forgot then a day to sort the attic boxes becomes a week to see Chicago. It’s honestly like Heroin. You have to limit yourself though because the allocations come from somewhere ya know, you can’t just borrow without giving back,” she said all this without really taking a breath.

The words echoed in Liam’s ears. *You can’t just borrow without giving back.* Suddenly it was bolded, capitalized and dancing on the bathroom mirror. My God, how had he forgotten?!

He fell to the toilet. He played back every visit to Emit, tapping his foot nervously as each desperate purchase reared its ugly head. He stared intently at nothing as though watching a film screen right in front of him. The bottom of his mouth separated from the top.

The shop door creaking and raising. Emit with his noisy pocket watch and four walls adorned in clocks. Emit, whose name spelled “time” backwards, was the man with the underground commodity, a drug more feigned for than nicotine. He could do the impossible. His sign flashed ‘time-pieces’ but what only about 2% of his customer base knew about Emit Schmidt was that his real business was generated from selling pieces of time.

Like a Vegas blackjack dealer, Emit went through the motions with speed, before you had too much time to think. The antiques in the glass counters just a ruse; with the flip of an hourglass there went wall 3 and behind it a vault of endless boxes. Each black with a silken inside and a curled watch around the middle. The watches were then set by Emit to offer an hour, a day, a week, a year, what have you. Whatever you could afford to buy, none of which affected real time. It was a brilliant business plan, concocted by Myron Schmidt, his grandfather and passed down two further generations. It had been open on Jane Street for over seventy years, seventy real-time years.

Hours were cheap, minutes even cheaper. Sometimes they were sold in bulk bundles since very few people needed minutes for anything. It was the days and weeks that got pricey and well, the months and years were really only for the affluent though they could be bartered.

Everything had a price and Emit was a greedy man. Not like his predecessors who were lenient.

Liam carefully made his way to the hall closet where he had kept every watchbox he had ever purchased, hoping one day to tally the money spent and he supposed now to keep an eye on his “spending.”

He pulled the string that illuminated his closet and took in the quantity with a shudder. His intent back in 1987 was good. Great even. His ailing wife Nina had been given six months to live. He had been sleeping at the hospital around the clock when he met Elaine Kinsley, a stressed out med student. She saw him crying one day and her heart broke for him. So she let him in on her secret over soup at the diner on 7th.

That was twenty-four years ago. Since then, there had just been so many delightful reasons to purchase time!

“Mr. Knoll, I’m so sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” Emit was still on the phone clutched tightly in Liam’s hand.

Liam said nothing.

“Mr. Knoll?”

“I’m here,” he finally muttered eyeing the piles and piles of watchboxes. There had to be fifty years there in between the umbrellas and raincoats.

“Mr. Knoll, the units of time come off of your own life. That should have been clearly understood. I apologize but you must not have enough real time left to cover this hour.”

With that, the phone disconnected.