

The Timer

By A.R. White

"Are you familiar with this?" Steven asked.

Of course I wasn't. I didn't do that sort of thing at the time.

The glistening syringe in Steven's bony left hand seemed an extension of himself. He unconsciously pushed it forward, plunger first, like a boy scout handing off a knife. That had to mean it was dangerous or valuable, but I didn't realize that at the time. I suppose my brain knew somewhere, where it knows a lot of things that I don't, but I'm not sure. I think I just really wanted to leave the world for a little while, and that syringe looked about like an escape pod.

"What is it?" I said. My voice was creaky from the strain of the night before. I remember that much.

I'm sure that Steven replied with some passage out of a Lewis Carroll or Roald Dahl book, or cited some of the choicer bits of prose from whatever movie was hot at the time, but nothing he could say could convince me to take the syringe from him. You see, I already decided the night before when I called him and told him that I was curious. No one is ever "curious" to look at contraband, and the dealers know that.

"How much, man?" I inquired.

"Gratis, friend."

"Very kind of you," even though I knew I would be buying his lunches for a few weeks after that. "So you going to show me your nursing skills or what?"

Steven worked in an animal hospital, but he could find a vein on a human better than most doctors. He once told me that they don't have drug tests where he worked. I guess dogs and horses aren't as important as people. Makes sense, unless you believe in reincarnation.

It's exciting to watch someone poke you with a poisonous needle. In most cases, as I have come to find in later years, you feel the effect instantly. Sometimes, like this time, I have been left waiting with an exhilarating "are-we-there-yet" sensation while the

stuff works its magic. I often wonder about the ambivalence of death by lethal injection. Do the inmates try to feel what's happening? Do they try to distract themselves so that they can't see the end? How long is a second when you're dying? I once heard of a guy singing Amazing Grace while they killed him.

My arm was impregnated with the last of the chemical. I thought that maybe I could feel the stuff moving inside me, but that was probably ridiculous fancy. I did, however figure out that it had taken effect when Steven's face melted off. That's always a dead giveaway.

In a movie studio, they have this white room with no corners. Not quite like the Oval Office, because the back wall is flat, and all of the corners are just rounded off as they approach joints. It creates the illusion that everything goes on forever in infinite white and gives the special effects guys a lot of room to work their craft and put weird stuff into the scene.

Well, once the room finished melting away and draining into itself, it looked a lot like that white room, except that it actually did go on forever. There was nothing there, save for me and everything comes with that. In retrospect, I'm not sure my clothes made the journey but I won't bore you with specifics.

I thought it was funny at first and started horsing around, but I'm not sure how long I walked through there. After awhile, I wanted the horse nurse back, but he wasn't around. There was nothing around. Well, there was white, and enough of that to spare.

Oh yeah. There was the gray feather on the ground and also the Face of God. Those stuck out like sore thumbs.

Let me start with the feather. I was ready to sit down when it came into view- a mere speck on the non-horizon. Even though it was so small, so monochromatic, it still made such a statement of presence with nothing else around to look at. I focused on it and set towards it at a brisk jog. I thought a breeze might come along and take it away, so I had to hurry.

When I finally reached my destination, I got a much better look at it. It was long- its slender, Plasticine trunk branched out into hundreds of perfectly-shaped follicles

of stormy barbs. At the bottom, it broke into a gossamer, organized chaos of cloudy cotton. Crystalline matter filled the hollow shaft of the vane, and flowed freely onto my hand as I picked it up.

“Do you mind?” came a voice from above me.

“Not at all,” I replied, turning and handing the feather back. Then I actually figured out what I was looking at.

I won’t go into exacting detail about the Face. Suffice to say, it has roots and arteries that run into everything. Areas of smooth perfection dot the surface but it is also infected in places with festering sores that continually run with blood. Most of the Face, however is fairly mundane (as giant faces go). I’m pretty sure it was male, but that’s probably because I am a male myself, and that’s the only perspective from which I can see the rest of the world.

Instead of hair, the Face had these little flowering green plants and there was something like a bean pod on most of them. There were also bits of pollen floating about His head, which he ingested at every possible opportunity through cruel, gnashing teeth. I think I recall the teeth more than anything else- blackened and oily, with a foul, sulfurous stench that engulfed me every time He spoke. I liked the pollen, though. Each speck glowed like a tiny blue ember, and I think that was comforting for some reason.

“I understand that you run this place,” I said. I know it’s God, but I felt rather non-chalant, considering that He knew everything about me, anyway. He would obviously realize that I was full of it in the event that I started in with the “thees” and “thous.”

“I do.”

“So I’ll get right to it, then,” I began. “Why am I here?”

I was feeling my oats right up until I got a good look at one of the bits of pollen. It was a tiny, frightened woman, relentlessly beating against the side of a translucent bubble. Then, with a sharp breath, He sucked her into his mouth and tore her apart. There might have been a million others that went in with her. I didn’t bother to hide my disgust and fear, because He would see it anyway. He didn’t bother to react, since by and large he couldn’t possibly care what I thought of him.

“Felt like talking,” said He.

Fantastic. "About what?"

"I just wanted you to know something," said He.

"What's that, Sir?" I smiled nervously as I spoke. The Face was pretty big, and I didn't much feel like it would notice if it accidentally ate me.

"I'm going to eat you in five thousand words."

When I get nervous, it feels like a sudden cold chill. That felt more like a tank of liquid nitrogen exploding in my stomach and boiling out of my nose and ears.

"Words, Sir?"

"Yeah. Like in those books I write."

"Ah."

Five thousand words? That was it? That was my story? As a boy, I had always considered myself more of the heroic type, the subject of a series of fantasy dime novels or some such nonsense. Even now, I thought that maybe I could be the depressing anti-hero type, like Camus's Mersault or some Hemmingway character. Five thousand words wasn't even a novella.

I had to say something. I couldn't let the conversation stop there.

"Including articles, Sir?"

"I'm afraid so," he consoled, but the face remained bland and expressionless.

"Starting now?"

"Nope. Now I'm sure you see why I'm so focused on brevity. You get out of here. You're wasting time on pointless dialogue."

My head was booming as I fled from God. How much time had I wasted? I'm not much for counting beans, but I'm reasonably certain that I had already used up about a third of my life by that point. And what sort of quality had my life thus far been- a ridiculous story about a giant head and a drug trip? What about spelling and grammar? Did I have any split infinitives or unclear antecedents? Had I truly lived righteously, or merely squandered my letters on pathetically-traditionalist proper pronouns like "Him?"

I awoke to see the horse nurse's horse-face. It was frozen in a frightened grin, eyes wide and mouth agape- as though the parent he hated so much had just told him in anger that he was adopted. As I walked over and felt his cold skin, it seemed obvious that

he had decided to stay with the Head as opposed to coming back. That, or he was eaten—same difference. The air was thick with the stench of death.

For future reference, when someone refers to “the stench of death,” they’re talking about feces.

The reality of it all snapped into sharp focus. The needle didn’t lie— I was going to be dead soon, and there was nothing I could do about it. Too much expository prose or an Oscar Wilde-style description would lay me out and the world would be done with me. There had to be something I could do.

The air was thin at Steven’s funeral. It was one of those neutral winter days where the deep blue sky just sucks the value out of everything except black. The mourners were perched about Steven’s grave like storm crows, their fashionable sable attire whipping in the wind. I was the only one in tweed because I was too poor to purchase a matching outfit to fit into the crowd— not that the effort would have been appreciated.

Steven’s mother had a much sharper version of his horse face. Her visage was jagged with a pointed snout, which she held aloft at all times, as though constantly smelling something delicious in the air. She threw glances my way over and over again, and I could almost sense gratitude in her eyes for giving her something to cry about and something to make her superior. With my help, she would become one of the so-called “strong people”

The rest of her family felt differently. The crows shot me fierce looks over and over again, stating unequivocally with their eyes that they would rather see me in the ground than their precious little drug dealer. I didn’t deserve to live when Steven had died. What would I do with my time on the earth that Steven wouldn’t have done? I would find a way to live longer than he did, that’s for sure. At this rate, a decent car chase would do me in.

Then they all said nice things about “God’s little soldier” and reaffirmed that his overdose was a tragedy. I didn’t even know he served. In retrospect, I’m sorry that I wasted so much of my remaining time at that godforsaken event. People say that, “funerals are for the living,” but they should really narrow that down to, “funerals are for telling the survivors that their loved ones aren’t being roasted in Hell.”

I took a different path on the way home from the funeral.

There are certain parts of a city that are bastions of filth, where the people are frightening and live their lives in abject poverty. These are places where humans are swept underneath the carpet of civilization to disappear forever- or at least until they are implicated in the death of someone of prominence. These tenebrous hollows are the stuff of nightmares, filled to the brim with creatures whose dark pacts render them deserving of both sympathy and vengeance.

I am speaking, of course, of the undersides of interstate overpasses, and they are excellent places to buy drugs.

In true funeral fashion, the sky opened its maw and vomited rain upon the fields of concrete below. The clouds rumbled above me, though nature's symphony paled in comparison to the sounds of eighteen-wheelers passing overhead. Even through the cacophony, I could still hear the sickening buzz of the roadway halogens like the roar of a swarm of electric flies. There was dull, rotting smell, and every time that lightning flashed, I could see dozens of ravening faces, huddled between the girders. I silently cursed myself for coming to a location that required such flamboyant language to describe.

In the dim, greenish glow of the streetlight, I spied a pair of yellow-stained, bloodshot eyes staring out at me. They watched me as I paced back and forth on the sheltered, dry sidewalk. I rubbed the underside of my forearm where the needle had been and shuddered as the cold crept into me.

A cell phone winked on beside the eyes, but their stare never left me as sooty fingers flickered over the keypad. The diseased mouth mumbled a few words into the phone and I could see the cracked teeth adorning the gums like detritus. It turns out that God did make man in his own image. I almost went up there to tell him that.

Almost. He was pretty scary.

Moments passed, and I was completely alone. Well, there were the people who lived there and Yellow Eyes, but our cultures were so alien that I might as well have been alone. Thunder and the sounds of traffic overhead crashed against me like waves. I wasn't kept waiting very long, though. Two headlights alighted in the haze outside and a vehicle rapidly approached- a modified 1970 Monte Carlo hearse with emerald-green

glitter-paint.

The back window opened up and a tiny man leaned out. The dictates of logic told me to avoid asking to see the wizard. His eyes were beady and his stature was absolutely imposing. I obviously needed to avoid unnecessary conversation.

“Looking for something, man?” he asked in a surprisingly deep voice.

“I need to see the Face of God again. It’s important,” I said.

The car sped off. I’m not sure if it was because I didn’t make sense- or because I did.

Looking up at Yellow Eyes, I emptied all of the cash from my wallet and put the money under a rock. I obviously didn’t need it.

I hadn’t even blinked before he skittered down the culvert with a fake grin on his face like I had just paid for a palm reading. Mustering an expression somewhere between oracular and psychotic, he took my hand in his own calloused fingers and spoke.

“Jesus loves you friend.”

It made sense to ask: “Do you know where I can find the Face of God?”

He showed me his celestial teeth again and tears welled in his eyes. “You got to go where it’s low, Boss. You got to go where you could already see.”

I bet he knew a dozen such places, but Yellow Eyes was clearly a busy man. He scampered off before I could say anything else, and not knowing his name, I didn’t call after him.

I was getting on in my time, and I couldn’t find God in a needle anymore. It seemed that I would have to find him through other means and this was as good a lead as any.

Well, I entertained the idea that it was a “good” lead, but what the hell did he even mean? Did he mean the places where the land is low, such as bayous or swamps? They’re certainly rotten enough- and rotten really means “filled with life” on a biological scale. Perhaps he spoke ironically of mountains, where some ascetics mused that the heavens hung low enough to reach. Maybe he was being facetious, and he meant six feet under- that was certainly low. Maybe he was just some cracked-out old timer looking to scare a kid.

Why was it that I fancied the homeless as the street shamans of our time? Perhaps it was because they are our pardoners. You can be the biggest scumbag of all time, rolling around in a car that you bought with money that you stole from old women and nursing babies- but if you stopped and dropped a dollar on a bag lady, you're a saint. Giving money directly to the homeless is buying indulgences. That's why they always say, "God bless you, afterwards."

Of course, looking to me for any sort of wisdom is like asking a burger-flipper for financial advice. I'm the sort of person who wastes precious life on tirades about bums and statements such as this one.

But the bum wasn't done talking.

"Baby faces!" he shouted, laughing as he walked. "Rust!"

"What?"

"Think low, man!"

I was dumbfounded, and worse, I was fresh out of baby faces. I knew of a place where there was plenty of rust- a regular chapel to the stuff. However, the sun was setting and I didn't want to go in the dark. Using the remainder of my prose to describe dying horribly of tetanus poisoning didn't really seem like the thing to do. I resolved to go to sleep...

And dream only of teeth.

I'm not an old man, but my back creaked the next morning as I arose. I wondered briefly if God's statement meant that I would suddenly age the rest of my biological clock and die a withered old corpse before the eyes of a frightened public. Or would the opposite happen- I'd remain young and healthy right up until a plane crashed into me? I certainly felt older, though perhaps my father felt the same way when he first realized that he would one day depart this Earth.

When you know there is a strong possibility that you're going to die soon, you pack pretty heavily. I stuffed a knapsack with an LED flashlight, a shaker flashlight, a knife, rope and fire-making tools (matches- I'm not a Boy Scout). I also needed high-calorie food, but I'm not really an adventurer. Given my couch-jockey status, I opted for the best non-perishable food I could find: peanut butter. I mean, I packed the kind of rope you use

to tie furniture into trucks, not climbing rope. I'm not exactly a credible authority when it comes to surviving.

Then I stopped packing, realizing that bringing that backpack full of garbage with me to the site will only result in my own demise. I formulated the theory from the cinematic stylings of Hitchcock, who only placed an object in the scene if it was going to be used. If I approached the area from an explorer's angle, each tool would inevitably be utilized to overcome a major obstacle, and at the end of my shenanigans, I would be incredibly dead. I would have to come at this thing like an observer-get in, have a look-see, get out. I tossed my loaded backpack down just inside the front door as a reminder of the adventure that I narrowly avoided.

Then I set out from my tiny little efficiency apartment for the Chapel of Rust.

It's rather sanctimonious of me to call something like the Wimbley Hotel the "Chapel of Rust," but that's exactly what it was. It was a temple built to opulence and the arrogance of Fulton Wimbley's family in the heyday of steel production. Fulton, something of a town hero, refused to follow his family's pursuit of immortality through architecture. He played cards, made love to floozies and drank until he died of syphilis at age forty-two. According to a fiftieth anniversary report in the newspaper, Fulton's eulogy contained phrases like, "lived life to its fullest," and "it was his time." I was pretty sure at the time that he spiraled into madness as his family fell to ruin, and I had no interest in a man who gave up on life.

However, the ruins of the now-infamous Wimbley Hotel interested me plenty.

The Wimbley was quite unique, as chateaus go. Each flagstone had a solid steel girder at its core, as a sort of loving homage to the money that built the place. A few years ago, some hurricane consumed the hotel, cracking off the stones and leaving behind a riveted husk. A heavy, salty wind blew in from the nearby ocean and tore the rest of the structure to shreds. It was tetanus city, but in the absence of baby faces, it would do.

I parked my car at the gate, which ironically, was made of stone, and clambered through the boards that had been nailed in the way. Walking down the overgrown path, it occurred to me that daytime was much better than nighttime when approaching these things. After all, maybe I was in a Lovecraftian short story, and a

nighttime jaunt to a haunted hotel is a quick way to find the ending. After making my way past the gnarled oaks that lined the pathway, the dim skeleton of the hotel came into view.

In a way, it was even more breathtaking that it had ever been when it was whole.

Perfect shafts of sunlight cut down through the canopy overhead and danced over the ruins. The crimson beams were a perfect swath of shadow, slashed out of the mossy rubble, pointing upwards to the cloudless sky. Even the saplings at the edge of the clearing somehow managed to grow towards the building, almost as if they bowed before it. The sight was truly sublime- a level of awe growing from just below existence.

And, in it all, I finally understood what the bum had meant when he said, "You have to go where it's low." The heavens were close to this place- reality was thin here, trapped in a spiral of entropic glory. It had to be like this anywhere there was awe to be had, whether it was the marvels of modern engineering, or the mass graves of a genocidal action. This was elemental, pure feeling, and I had no doubt that I was onto something. I would find God here and confront him, for better or for worse.

I snapped off a thick, heavy branch and cautiously made my way forward to clamber up onto the rubble. I didn't think there would be a cave-in or a collapse this many years after the building fell, but I wasn't certain. Every few steps, I popped the ground with the blunt end of my branch, listening for hollow spots, but found nothing. It was easy going, and for a few moments, I caught myself feeling fated to uncover the secrets of this place.

My destination was the old ballroom off the west wing. During the heyday of the hotel, it was essentially a cooled atrium with a phenomenal botanist. After the hurricane, it became a bubble-shaped cage, housing loose stones and a tremendous amount of wildflowers. It was there that I could find the largest clumping of debris. I passed through what should have been a gorgeous archway and made my way to the center of the room to stand before the shrine of dead steel.

Nothing happened. I realized that I was a patient in a waiting room where there was no doctor, and the briefest thought of apostasy passed through my mind.

The debris was nothing more than a hunk of refined element, torn from the

mud of the earth. It had been shaped by man's hand, but it was as gnarled as I would be in a short while. It was blank, empty and certainly not revealing the truths of the universe to me. But what should I have expected? I trusted a man with the craziest eyes I had ever seen to tell me the secret of divinity. He couldn't even live his own life well; why did I think he could help me with mine?

I didn't care anymore at that point. My life was essentially over, whether I spent it saving damsels or enjoying a tasty bowl of sugared cereal. The more I lived, the more I died, and that was simply the truth of the matter. There was even a small chance that my remaining thousand or so words would be spent in eulogy, or some sort of afterlife pre-gustatory adventure. I plopped down on the warm bars of rusty steel without a care in the world for unseen sharp objects and some of the sandy material sloughed off onto my jeans.

I ran my hand over the nearest bar, pulling off more rust and rubbing it together between my fingers. The dust snapped apart in an almost crystalline manner, crumbling further. It occurred to me that the rouge sand had once been hardened steel with a perfect sheen on it. Over a thousand people's efforts had been captured to yield this one bar, which was formed from elements gathered from locales across the country. The distance traveled by the materials was greater than the rocks of Stonehenge, but we didn't think that so impressive in our modern era.

And within the rust, an infinitude of different fractal patterns emerged, each powered by ever-changing atomic structures. It was more complex than the most intricate Escher, beyond the processing capabilities of any computer. The smooth steel had curled like flower petals into what I saw before me, only to be torn off and absorbed back into the environment. It looked like the old teeth marks I used to put in the wood of my pencils in elementary school.

And that was it—"rust and baby faces." It finally made sense. God was in the passage of time, and all of the entropy that came with it. I wouldn't be able to stop anything, any more than I could stop all reproduction or the passing of clouds. There would be no negotiation, no future visits from the Lord. Only his will to utterly destroy me would be carried out. At this rate, I would see those teeth by nightfall.

There I sat, alone with my thoughts and the cool breeze that poured off the sea to gambol through the oaks. I felt a spider on my heart, climbing over it, stabbing with its chitinous legs and injecting its frozen venom into my body. I couldn't stop it. I would never stop it. I suddenly wanted friends, just so I could get someone to cry over my body. I'm not sure how long I sat there. It must've been long enough to gain His notice, though, because the sky opened up and it began to rain.

Not wanting to die of pneumonia or mudslides, I shambled towards my car.

The beautiful thing about driving in the rain is the way that the passing cars sound. They're like little waves that disappear into the mist, never to be seen again as they slam into the shore. I knew that I was also one of those lapping currents- soon to fall into complete obsolescence.

It proved to be too much, and tears streamed down my cheeks.

I don't know what I was listening to, but it fell right into perfect synchronicity with my mind at the time, and my little manly grunts soon became the splattered, anguished sobs of the bereaved. The rain redoubled its efforts to isolate me and the sun all but disappeared from view. I didn't want to be Mersault. I didn't want to be Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I needed to find the locus of control of my life and turn it hard, because at last count, I only had four hundred words left to live.

Alone, frightened, sobbing on a crowded, wet freeway in a car with bald tires, I was ready to resign myself to a horrifying, deadly car crash... but you always formulate the best plans when you've just given up. I concocted a phrase that allow me to flawlessly live out the rest of my days. Six is a special number: the number of words in my salvation.

"And without incident, sixty years passed."

And now, here we are. I'm lying alone on my bed here in Shady Acres or Piney Vale or whatever nursing home this is. I started talking again because I dreamt of God recently. I didn't want to run away when I saw him this time- not because I wasn't afraid. Rather I knew that only an ignorant man-child would consider running a viable option. In the dream, I was far more decrepit than our first meeting, but he was as radiant as ever. Well, as radiant as a vine-encrusted deific eating machine can be.

"You have to use what's left of your life or I'm going to take it away," He said.

"But I've honored you! I've lived within the confines of your world!" I cried.

"I kill everyone. I spare no one. Your life ends tomorrow night, or in about two hundred words. Your choice, but I'm hungry."

Then I awoke to solitude with no one to call. I don't have a family, you see- I never made one because I didn't want to take the time away from myself. I'm not even super-rich- I failed to make that happen because I didn't want to use any of my precious daily life to make a gambit. This room is so full of the absence of things- success, love, life.

I can hear the teeth now. It wasn't sulfur that I smelled the first time I was close to God's mouth. I'm now almost certain that it was medicine and feces. Everything... every single action that I've taken up to this point has been wholesale vanity.

Every action except this one.

"Life has nothing to do with how long it is. It is what you say," I mutter.