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# The Hour Gift

by W. Lawrence

“Charlie,” Patricia called.

Charles turned to listen to his wife. “Yes, honey? I’m getting into the shower.”

“Don’t forget to set your clock back tonight.”

Water pounded down on his back as Charles considered the unanticipated boon. An entire hour—restitution for time stolen six months prior. A late night transformed magically into a decent night’s rest, though the idea of squandering the time on sleep felt almost petty. He could split the hour, devoting time to the kids rather than grunting at them to listen to their mother. Dread of a tired morning filled with hurried bowls of cereal faded to dreams of cheesy omelets and smiling children. He imagined Patty coming home from work, peering into an empty sink, and bragging to her mother of her thoughtful husband who cleaned up after the chaos of the morning heave out the door.

Charles swam on a cloud of steam and body wash bubbles, and considered how a single organized morning could become a catalyst for

redefining their departures into the world. He considered keeping the time change secret from the kids. Ah, teasing them into thinking they only had twenty minutes then revealing over an hour of cartoon watching or game playing or studying the spelling list Timothy struggled with early that night. He emerged confidently from the shower—a star player bursting onto the field to champion the game to victory.

Charles peered into the bedroom, eyed his wife's bare shoulder, and frowned at seeing Patty half asleep already. He carefully climbed under the covers, shut off his light, kissed the top of his wife's head, and turned about. Pressing his back against her warmth and feeling the night close about him, a comforting blanket of relaxation incubated a new beginning.

The night shifted and swam with dreams blending strangers and neighbors and talking violins in a bizarre loop. The neighbors hissed their disdain, whispering amongst each other how terrible his lawn looked, how the previous owners took much better care. Clearly that new family didn't have pride in their home. They haven't even edged their grass! Have you seen the flaking paint on their front door? The violins sang sadly to each other as they danced upon melancholy waves overhead. Charles excused

his behavior with the long work hours, their hectic schedule, the promise of grand plans. And so he approached a new neighbor's house—only this was the same door, the same neighbor, and the same rumormongering.

Eyes opened wide and took in the predawn darkness filling the bedroom. His wakefulness wasn't brought by alarm clock or trashcans emptying on a crisp winter morning, but by a stirring somewhere beneath his lungs and hidden behind his stomach. Charles felt his chest pounding, his skin clinging to the sheets the way shirt fabric sticks to a runner's back.

It pried his consciousness open even as he pressed desperately to close it. Worse though, he could feel his reasoning switching on, the dreamless portions of his mind taking in the reality oozing around him. He shunned the waking, pushed back against its onslaught, desperate even to return to the looping dream and its endless ridicule than let it in.

He stared at the stucco shapes in the ceiling and carved faces in its randomness. He thought how desperately his car needed to be cleaned, how Patricia had hounded him to clear a space in the box-stacked garage, how a stack of files he brought home from work taunted from his briefcase. And the washing machine—yes, that had gone all wobbly and

threatened a work strike. Not that there was any time for any fiddling with appliances. No, neither would there be time to change the car's oil, nor paint the guest room before his in-laws arrived.

Charles looked to his alarm clock and noted he woke a solid hour before his alarm would ring. The option to sleep in stolen away on this most magical of days. He remembered filling the previous night with such grand plans for the morning, but now... Waking the children would be a chore and undoubtedly meet with resistance. His wife would berate him endlessly for stealing her precious hour of sleep. The idea of cracking an egg or opening a briefcase carried the stress of a day's labor.

Charles spotted a violin in the stucco, and then another. Shapes inspiring a disturbed dream, or perhaps a dream creating recognition in the Rorschach ceiling. As the dread dawn pried open the blinds of the room, Charles lay there eyes wide, pressed into his mattress by the weight of a thousand unaccomplished tasks.