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Ronald J. De Marco

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Ronald J. De Marco

On an average Sunday, the residents of my small rural community known as Placid Hills rarely take any notice of world events, or, for that matter, events much beyond on our own outlying farms. Being primarily a self-sustained community deters a friendly outreach to our neighboring towns, with the exception of the occasional weekend trips to the city for some "urban" excitement.

On this cool autumn evening, however, all the fishing gear is stored away in dark cellars, the empty hunting guns with polished barrels are hanging in their racks, and the bags of newly fallen leaves are stacked by the roadside for tomorrow morning's garbage pickup.

This, unfortunately, is not a typical Sunday. Oh, the painted ribbons of fire-colored clouds which stretch along the width of the horizon are a sight to see, and the air is exceptionally easy to breathe, but the free ice cream from Mr. Harper just doesn’t taste as good anymore knowing that it will be that last one. Ever.

Six minutes.

The majority of us were either lying on our family room floor watching television or listening to the “Sunday Evening Special” on the radio when the announcement was broadcast. It was the last thing anyone had expected to hear; after all, Reverend Parsons had just given a strong sermon this morning on the importance of passing God onto future generations.

So, naturally, when the emergency broadcast announcer spoke, there were those who grabbed their families and sped down Route 67 in hopes of spending their last precious moments with a close relative. Trying to get to a shelter would have been futile because the nearest location that anyone knew about was nearly thirty miles west in Madison.

Then there were those of us who took it in stride, like it was just another obstacle in life's path that would have to be met and overcome. My grandma was just such a person. When she heard the news, she walked calmly into the kitchen and began making a pitcher of pink lemonade.

Meanwhile, here I sit on the steps of my front porch peeling off loose paint with my fingernail and looking at the frantic people around me. If somebody had asked me fifteen minutes ago how a certain person would respond in a situation like this, I thought I would have been able to tell them precisely what that person would have done. I've just proven to myself that I was undeniably wrong.
Five minutes.

I keep finding myself staring at the second hand on my watch. It seems to be moving a million times faster than I've ever seen it move before. A few years ago, my friend Charlie asked me what I'd do if I knew I only had ten minutes left to live. I told him that I'd do all the stuff that I was never allowed to do before, but now that his scenario has come true, I'm not so sure anymore. I know in the back of my mind that there's something I want to do, but I'm not sure what it is.

I can hear grandma stirring the pink lemonade in the kitchen, and I sigh. If there was ever a time when this town knew an atheist, surely that must now be in the past. In the distance I can hear Reverend Parsons ringing the church bell, and I notice the far-off streetlights beginning to flicker into existence with the waning light. The street has emptied out quickly.

Four minutes.

Grandma carefully presses down on the handle of the screen door with her elbow and steps through the doorframe carrying a glass of pink juice in each hand. It is then that I suddenly realize what I want to do so badly. I tell grandma that I love her and I give her a kiss on the cheek before the screen door has even closed. I ask her if I may take her glass of lemonade with me. This time she smiles at me and doesn't ask where I'm going, or what time I'll be back. She knows the thoughts and dreams of the young. She knows exactly where I'm going and what I intend to do. In fact, she knew two minutes ago, before the thought had even crossed my mind.

I can feel grandma watching me from behind as I turn and walk rapidly down the long gravel road. I sense her longing to go with me, but she knows that she's had her chance, and now it's my turn. I look back over my shoulder and wave to her, and even though I can barely make out the spectacles perched atop her nose, I can still see the single teardrop etch its way down her face.

Three minutes.

I am looking at the fading crimson glow above the silhouette of trees on the horizon and thinking back to the day before yesterday. I was at work in the general store when Mary Ann and I had been talking about going to see a movie at the bijou next weekend. Mary Ann is the cashier there and one of my best friends in the whole world. It's weird how a guy and girl can sometimes communicate better than two people of the same gender. She and I talk about everything from politics and weather to problems with our relatives and friends. What's more, we always come away feeling better once we've had a chance to clear our minds.

I look down from the far off sunset into the waves of the pink lemonade. I'll have to hurry and hope that I make it on time.
Two minutes.

At this point in time I realize some of the things I could do in just two minutes: I could milk one of our cows, or perhaps ride over to the Sutter's farm on Lucas, my favorite horse, or I could even say a prayer to God almighty. What I really want to do, though, will only take a matter of seconds. It's something I should have done a long time ago, and something so important I don't see why I didn't do it earlier. Come to think of it, it's the only thing that I've never gotten off of my mind.

As I turn the corner, I see Mary Ann sitting on the steps of her front porch, her face covered by slender fingers. Her shoes lay next to her, and bright red colored toenails rock back and forth in rhythm with her body. I call out to her and she looks up, her face brightening upon my arrival.

One minute.

I sit down next to her and hand her one of the wet glasses of lemonade. For the first time in my life, I'm at a loss for words. I don't know what to say to Mary Ann to comfort her this time. All I can do is stare into her brown eyes and listen to the church bell toll in the distance.

Thirty seconds.

She breaks the silence between us by raising her glass and thanking me for stopping by, and thanking me also for being a good friend. I tap my glass against hers and we both take a ceremonial sip. I return the gesture by saying virtually the same thing in different words.

Fifteen seconds.

The tension increases as we both peer into the darkening evening sky. Only the insects seem to be unaware of the impending disaster soon to befall this peaceful community. I still haven't said what I came for, and she knows it. I turn to face her again and she looks back at me, smiling. She sets down her glass and opens her arms. I move into them, hugging her for the first time. I smell the faint aroma of a perfume I've never noticed before.

Ten seconds.

I stop hugging her and look into her eyes again. Quick, I urge myself, say it now before it's too late. I can feel my face flush and I suddenly realize that she knows what I have wanted to say all along.
Five seconds.

She grabs me in a tight embrace and lightly presses her lips to my cheek. As she begins to whisper to me, I realize that there are only

Three seconds

left. “I love

Two seconds.

you,

One second.

too.”