

THE WATCH

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He looked up. Two typewriter keys had gotten hung somewhere in the office for a fraction of a minute. But immediately, the small span of silence was replaced by the frantic rattle of the keys to make up for the loss. So many typewriters, so many keys, each in charge of one small letter. If one key was taken away, where would the machine be? It would then be crippled, useless. Strange that one small key could be so crucial—and not one man. He looked back down.

The cathedral clock chimed five gigantic strokes. Instantly, every typewriter ceased—as if a great conductor had cut off his musicians. He smiled, strangely pleased when one lone key clicked sheepishly after the others. Well, at least it was not perfect. Before the last chime ceased, he knew he would be the only one left in the big office. At 5:01 every day, the others vanished. He sometimes tried to watch each one leave; he wanted to make sure they actually left through the doors. But he invariably blinked—and then they were all gone. Today was his last day to prove to himself that they didn't disappear by a magic triggered by the cathedral chime.

But they were gone; he listened to the last staccato tap of a high heel as it receded down the tiled hall—such a hollow, solitary sound. He was alone.

Slowly he gathered his day's assignment together, neatly aligning the edges of the sheets. Deliberately, he positioned the staple lengthwise a quarter of an inch down from the top and a quarter of an inch in from the side. Carefully, he applied the necessary pressure and slowly released it once the stapler clicked. He placed the copy neatly in the "Finis" box on his desk.

Most of his personal items he had already removed from his desk. All that remained in the drawers were the neuter equipment—pens, pencils, carbons, etc. Only his name plate—George Drake—remained, along with an old framed photograph, on top of the desk.

He reached for the photograph, holding it with both hands, elbows cocked against the desk's edge. It was a black and white photograph depicting that very office in its original form, when Harris and Sons, Inc. was just beginning. There were only a few desks, with people busily typing or talking. The typewriters were the old heavy black models. He smiled remembering the laughter when carriages were slung off their tracks in the feverish excitement of a typist. Now the only break in the typist's manner was an occasional sharp, terse expletive—no emotion really, just a terse noise uttered and banished in the same fraction of a second.

He could feel the atmosphere change as he remembered those old days. The days when each person was sorely missed if absent. Now, they simply dialed a substituting service and had a replacement in hours. Ah, but the old times, the fervor, the excitement, the emotions. . . .

A lower staccato was approaching in the hall, followed by a rattling mop can. The janitors were beginning. He put his name plate in his satchel and carefully laid the photograph inside. He quickly latched the satchel and left the office, closing the hollow door after him. It glided shut on an air cushion. He sighed, wishing he could have heard the decisive thump of the old door. There was just no feeling in a door that couldn't talk.

In the subway station, he was quickly picked up on a wave of packed moving bodies. Eventually the wave ebbed and he was beached at his chosen depot. He turned for a moment to watch the wave roll away to other platforms. He boarded the train and sank deep into a window seat.

Retirement. He was now officially a retired man. He had finally reached that magical age that everyone spent their life working towards. The day when one retired—and devoted all free time to the pursuit of happiness. He had finally earned all the leisure time he'd often dreamed of. Retirees were allowed to play golf, indulge in 'trash' books, as well as real literature. He now had all the time he needed for those clubs and organizations he'd always wanted to participate in, but never found the time to join. He now had the time. . . .

Strange to see all those cars backed up blocks on end, nearly immobile. The surreys with their prancing horses used to rattle down the streets just that slowly. But back then, that pace had been a fair clip. Imagine stopping the carriage in the middle of the street to tip a hat to a friend! Today, if a driver were to do that, he'd get a traffic ticket in two seconds, not to mention the anger incurred from all the impatient

strangers. He wondered vaguely if Bub Williams remembered the golf game they had arranged in the middle of rush hour.

. . . to play that golf game with Bub. But no, Bub had left town twenty-five years or so ago. A mutual friend had visited Bub a few years back and reported Bub was so crippled with arthritis that his fingers had frozen permanently curled. Bub had laughed and joked he could still hold a golf club, he just couldn't pick it up. George had not laughed. . . .

He had often made a list of things he was going to do when he retired. He drew one of these carefully out of the wallet in his coat pocket and unfolded it:

1. Drink Champagne (That was out; his mild diabetes couldn't tolerate the sugar).
2. Plant a small garden (Not much he could plant on a balcony).
3. Take grandkids to park (Besides the fact that they were four states away, the park was now a parking lot).

The list went on, but he crumpled it into a tight wad, trying to ignore the pain radiating through his fingers. He'd just go to the party.

The train stopped. He moved onto the platform waiting to be launched onto the outgoing tide.

He spoke to the doorman as he went through his building's lobby. No one was in the elevator as he rode to the seventh floor. He walked noiselessly down the carpeted hallway and turned the key easily in the lock.

He crossed the room, hanging his suit coat neatly in the closet, placing his satchel neatly on the shelf with his hat. Long had he and Emma planned this day, his retirement day. They were to have dinner at Peppino's where they had had lunch the day he'd been hired. Strange how one never thought of things changing—not then anyway. Now-well, now change was expected. It brought no surprises, just acquiescence.

Peppino's was gone—burned in the street riots. Senseless, shocking—but he'd seen them all just shrug. Emma had cried. How like Emma. She was gentle and sweet without being silly. He saw very few of her kind these days. Oh, some in the office were called "sweet," but he could feel the calculating brassiness of lost innocence. The sweetness was only an acceptable guise. Emma was soft. . . .

But Emma, too, was gone. And here, the day they'd laughed about and planned for so often. He shrugged. He'd long since given up expecting anything. They'd laughed about the proverbial gold watch of retirement. A machine to keep track of their full hours together He shrugged and headed for the bedroom.

He dressed slowly and carefully. He retraced his steps to the subway and alighted from a taxi in front of a spacious condominium. Slowly he walked up the path and pressed the bell. Inside, a chime cascaded down a tinkling scale. A maid opened the door.

The entire office personnel had attended. Even some of the old employees, those just recently retired. He was led to his place of honor, a seat to the right of Mr. Finch, president.

He looked curiously at Mr. Finch whom he'd only seen a few times since the company had been sold last year! Mr. Finch grasped George's hand firmly, sending small spikes of pain through the arthritic joints, and pumped it vigorously. The entire office personnel applauded.

The banquet was an elaborate feast. George Drake was the last of the original Harris and Sons, Inc. employees to reach retirement. Mr. Finch had decided it was a grand occasion to score with the current employees. He'd crack down later.

George looked curiously around the room, nodding now and again at some old friend. Their presence puzzled him. He ate very little and was quite relieved when Mr. Finch finally tapped his wineglass for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank you all for appearing here to pay this last tribute. . . ."

George heard Mr. Finch's speech only distantly. He was watching the other retirees gathering at the foot of the table, their faces masked with sad smiles.

"... as a token of our gratitude . . . loyalty . . . our company. . . ."

Somehow he stood upon cue, but his attention was on the advancing retirees and the small box Zeke carried.

"... as a token of the time given. . . ."

He opened the box. Inside was the proverbial gold watch and a small tear crowded the corner of his eye.

Craig Danners was seated facing George Drake at the banquet. He saw the small tears in George's eyes and watched the quick flickering glance George passed over each of his old cohorts. Craig Danners did not comprehend. He thought George to be immensely surprised and pleased at the expensive watch. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and bent to whisper to Lorilei, his wife.

Craig Danners was new to the company of Harris and Sons, Inc. He was young and ambitious. Mr. Finch was on the lookout for young executives. That was precisely why Danners was seated so near George at the dinner. He had switched name cards before the guests had been

seated. But now he was restless. Under the table Lorilei kicked him, none too daintily, so he tried to settle down by reviewing the day's events. He often did this. He wasn't really sure just what it accomplished but, as he seldom found fault with his actions, it was good therapy.

Now, however, he kept seeing George Drake sitting quietly at his desk in the office. It had been Danner's typewriter keys that had caused George to look up. Danner had scowled, and as he stopped to untangle the keys, he had seen George's face. It had made him nervous.

Danner did not know George very well. Sure, he spoke to him, and joked about ballgames with him, but something about George had always made Danner uneasy. He was glad George was finally retiring.

It'd do the old codger good. Danner leaned back in his dining chair and suppressed a smile. Retirement, now that was a nice thought. He had a ways to go to get to sixty-five, but if he played his cards right, he'd be able to retire long before that. Then he could sail Caribbean cruises three months of the year, and spend several nights a week at the Yacht Club house. Just think, first a round of par golf, followed by a hot sauna and topped with a candle light dinner with the best house brandy.

Lord knows he hadn't time to enjoy the Club now. It took a week's salary just to pay the monthly dues. Of course, Lorilei had complained about the "men only" rules, but a full-length rabbit coat had placated that tempest.

Yeah, boy, ole' George sure had it made. He didn't have to worry about catering to some old lady's whims and fancies. Abruptly, Danner remembered how he had smiled knowingly at George as he offered his condolences at Emma's funeral. He had thought perhaps he could reach George then. But the conspirator's smile had been lost on the older man. George had only withdrawn and turned away with a sad, pitying look in his eyes.

Lorilei kicked him again. He scowled and shot her a dark glance, but it fell upon hard cool eyes. He stopped in his thoughts and considered her. She was undoubtedly beautiful. Actually, her nose was too long, her brows too haughty. The nose she softened with make-up artistically applied. The brows she softened with a practiced tilt of her head. She was as ambitious as he. At times, he admired her; at times, he feared her. But he was always proud to introduce her as his wife.

A guest bumped into his chair. Craig Danners was momentarily flustered, but recovered immediately. He watched the guests begin to mill around. He watched passively as Mr. Finch shook hands with George Drake, and listened as Finch accepted Drake's early departure.

Again Danner thought how lucky George was to be—going home to an apartment where he had complete freedom and privacy. Such a life—no one to concern oneself with, no where to be at a specific time, no special projects to be done on time. A life with no restrictions. . . .

On impulse, Danner pushed his chair back and strode to where George awaited his coat and hat. With a knowing smile, he offered George his hand, "George, congratulations! You, above everyone else I know, deserve this new life!"

Danner lowered his hand, confused. George only stood there, mutely looking at him with the same eyes Danner had seen at Emma's funeral. Slowly George turned to receive his coat and hat, leaving without a verbal acknowledgement.

Danner shrugged, looked for Mr. Finch and immediately forgot George Drake.

