



The Interval

by Peter Blush

All through that night Reginald McLeash drifted wearily in and out of sleep, his eyes occasionally focusing on the progress of an early September moon arching its trajectory across the windowpane. He watched it begin at a low point from the left of the glass where it gradually traveled into the upper reaches of the frame as the dawning hours began their ultimate conquest of the sky.

Harkening to the early cawing of crows flying over the barn, he turned his head from the window and gazed upon the sleeping figure of his wife, her white mound of hair highlighted in a waxing lunar glow, the sheets heaving with her every breath.

“More'n likely this is not what she'd a wanted,” he thought. “More'n likely I ain't got no earthly choice.”

He turned and scanned the darkened bedroom; the dresser, the night table, the gun rack on the wall. His hands trembled as he inched away from her. His stomach felt hollow and hard. Reaching out for his cane he struggled from the bed, grabbing his checkered shirt and blue denims from the closet. Stepping naked into a wedge of moonlight, he took the 32-caliber rifle from the rack. Cradling it under his free arm he watched his own shadow pass over his wife and as he opened the door, he hesitated and thought back long ago when he first saw her.

"She has a face that shows you something different each time you look her," he once revealed to a friend. "I don't mind telling you that shadows and highlights during private moments would make you believe the universe was created only for her."

He shook the memory from his head and slipped out of the room.

Downstairs he dressed in the stillness of the back parlor. The rust colored light of dawn had already begun to permeate the room, illuminating his wife's figurines positioned inside the bookcase, gleaming off the photos on the mantle, as well. Reginald looked at them hard. There were two boys standing alongside the house, one dressed in the black robes of a graduate, the other, younger, his face beaming over his white shirt and red tie. He spotted himself inside one of the frames, surrounded on the front lawn by people he didn't know and all at once became irritated and ran his hands through his hair.

"Why in the hell does she keep doing that," he wondered out loud. "Hanging pictures of strangers all over the room, ignoring our own kin. Silly, crazy woman."

He dug his hands into the pockets of his denims and pulled out the contents: two unfilled prescriptions, a ticket stub from last Saturday night's bingo, and a pocket watch, its gold cover long ago lost, its face cracked and frozen in time.

Reginald clutched his leg and remembered the accident. "She gave me that damn watch thirty years ago," he whispered. "And me being the darn fool I am, busted it the very next day."

He discarded the prescriptions and the stub into the trash bin then stuffed the watch back into his pocket. Afterward, he opened the box of ammunition he had set out the night before, took out one round and placed it in the rifle's chamber.

From his vantage he could see the backyard shed through the screen door. He saw the loose chain running through the hole in the gate where a bolt used to be and the bundled shape of his old dog, a brown mongrel terrier, lying motionless against the fence.

Reginald tossed his cane to the floor, slung the rifle over his shoulder and limped outside. The old dog gave a start then struggled to its feet. Reginald looked away.

Southward he could see the surrounding mountains standing black against the morning sky. To the west, half a dozen stars still shimmered inside their own dying light. All around there was a sweet fragrance to the air, a blending of fresh cut hay and cow dung.

When he got to the shed he threaded the chain through the hole and pulled back the gate.

"Come on, Ol' Jack," he said, his eyes moistening. "Come on, my smelly ol' guy."

They made a pitiful pair, he reckoned; the dog walking lamely at his side, its eyes swelling in stress, its tongue hanging from its mouth like a piece of old leather, while Reginald, hunched back and hobbling from a trick knee, teetered over the ground.

As they reached the forest line he heard the sound of the brook gurgling over the rocks and he remembered years ago how he'd taken his sons out there in late Spring. He visualized their bamboo poles whipping the air, their lines streaming and curving out over the water until they finally hooked their catch.

He continued to lead the dog along the wooded edge until he spied the decaying remnants of his '49 Plymouth, the upholstery long disintegrated, the paint chipped, the body pocketed with holes. But immediately he realized something was different, out of place until he saw the great oak lying horizontal behind the car, its mound of roots torn upward from the ground.

“Must've fallen in that windstorm a few days back,” he thought. “Damned shame.”

The sun had reached the edge of the eastern ridge, its rays firing through the trees like probing fingers of light. One of them caught him on the side of his face. He felt the warmth and all at once, inside the interval, began to cry.

Before stepping into the cover of trees he peered back over his shoulder one more time. He had a wide acre view of his house and barn. He could see the panorama of his cornfield, a harvest of stalks swaying in the mist, a haunting sea of light green on the verge of turning gold. It was beautiful.

Reginald swallowed hard and led the dog to the Plymouth. He leaned against the back fender and studied the chamber of the rifle. Anchoring himself against the body of the Plymouth he gripped the rifle firmly in his hands while tears splashed on his wrists like soft rain. His vision became blurred as he tried to focus on the ground but in the corner of his eye there came minute explosions of light, as though someone were taking a photo with a flash over and over again until he realized it was coming from inside the roots of the old tree, something glimmering from the clutter.

“I know I'm a confused old goat,” he thought, his finger feeling its way around the trigger. “I know my memory's goin' and it's taking my body along with it. But I've come this far and there ain't no turning back.”

He was awash in sunlight now as the flashing, twisting explosions from the tree suddenly turned wild and furious in the wind. But his finger was steady, pressing harder into the cold clammy steel of the trigger . . . until he heard the voice, a high-pitched scream set with panic.

"Reginald! God Almighty what are you doing?"

When his vision cleared, he saw his boots straddling the surface of dead leaves and tinder dry branches, his legs frozen like wooden stilts. But in the center of everything was the great black hole of the gun barrel staring back at him like the Cyclops of death.

Suddenly he was looking into the face of his wife, her eyes wide in terror, her skin blanched as though devoid of blood.

“My God, Reg,” she said, her voice quivering as she gently took the rifle. “My God.”

He stammered trying to rise above his confusion. "I came out here to do away with old Jack," he said weakly.

His wife sat down on the running board of the Plymouth cradling her head in her arms.

"Reginald," she whimpered. "You put that dog down three years ago."

McLeash ran his hands through his thinning white hair, his eyes locking onto the tiny strobes of light still bursting from the roots of the tree. He stepped past the Plymouth, reached inside the tangle, and brought out the gold, circular cover of the pocket watch he had lost all those years ago. Wiping the dirt from its surface he turned it over and read the simple inscription etched cleanly into the metal:

It's about time.

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