

“Twenty Seconds Before...”

By Nastasia Mikhailova

On 13th January 1980 at 10:58 am, exactly two minutes before the assigned time, the doorbell at Mr. Smith’s house rang. The 56-year-old lean man put away his glasses in their case, his feet into leather slippers and got up to open the door through a cold grim hallway. Little did he know that he was exactly twenty steps and twenty seconds away from an event that would forever change his life.

Mr. Smith opened the door. Chilly air blew into his face, yet he hardly paid any attention to it. Strangely, instead of a friend that he had been expecting, he saw a delivery man. The man smiled, handed Mr. Smith a brown package about the size of a hamburger box, and left before Mr. Smith could express his confusion. The front door was closed, and when the brown box was opened, there lay a pocket watch with a silver chain. Mr. Smith flipped open the lid and stared at the watch for 46 seconds, wondering if he was dreaming. The clock’s hand was moving counterclockwise, and three times faster than it would on a regular watch.

The doorbell rang once more, now at exactly 11:00 am. Mr. Smith opened it and was surprised yet again. Standing there was indeed his best friend, but he was 40 years younger than he had been just yesterday. “Andrey! What’s up! Wait, why are you wearing your dad’s suit? You look hideous!” the friend, whose name was David, said and started laughing. Mr. Smith was completely baffled and thought this was some kind of joke. He rushed over to the two-meter-long and 50 cm wide oval mirror that hung on the wall next to the front door. What he saw there made him dizzy. The reflection of the mirror was showing Mr. Smith at age 16, before he made

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all the mistakes that he was regretting for his whole life, before he broke up with a girl that he still loved 40 years after, before he quit painting, before he went to college for a profession that he ended up regretting. Now he was wearing a suit that hung loosely on his frame, still holding a box with the silver watch.

“Are you okay?” David asked. “You look as pale as a ghost!”

“Yes, I’m alright.” Mr. Smith murmured.

“Go change into some decent clothes then! We’re running late for the movies! The girls are waiting for us!”

Exactly 40 years had passed since that incident. At 11:00 am sharp, the doorbell to Mr. Smith’s house rang.

“Grandpa! Somebody is here!” A little boy shouted, running in and holding a paper airplane in his tiny hands.

“Okay, tell Grandma to open the door, please,” Andrey Smith said, placing a paint brush by the easel.

The boy nodded and ran off, shouting something to his grandmother. Mr. Smith got up from his working place, glanced appraisingly at the painting he had been working on for the past week, and smirked. He was thinking about how lucky he was to have had a chance to change his life for the better: to follow his dream career, marry the woman he loved, stay friends with the people that truly respected him, and live a great life.

His life changed dramatically; he worked as an artist, which he enjoyed greatly. He had a wonderful family, and even though his life was now the kind he would’ve hated 40 years ago—busy and loud—Mr. Smith was happy. With those thoughts in mind, he walked to the living room to greet his best friend David, when suddenly the watch with a silver chain that

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was resting in a pocket of his pants made a strange noise. Mr. Smith took the watch out, flipped open the lid, and stared at it in confusion. The hand of the clock was fluttering in place. Andrey's head began to spin as he realized what day it was, but he still went to meet David.

"Oh hello, my famous painter friend Andrey Smith! I haven't seen you for two whole years while you were traveling and exhibiting your artworks! How many countries did you and Betty visit? By the way, she looks stunning!" David grinned, "Cheerful as always," he added.

During lunch Mr. and Mrs. Smith were sharing stories about exhibitions, galleries and travels. They told David that in just ten days, all three of their children and eight grandchildren would be gathering at their house for Christmas. Later, when Mr. Smith and David sat alone in front of the fireplace, drinking coffee with Betty's freshly baked lemon pie and enjoying the warmth of the house, David joked around with Andrey. He was wondering aloud: what would've happened if Mr. Smith didn't apologize to Betty for his silly jealousy? What would've happened if he hadn't enlisted Aunt Peggie's help to persuade his father not to force him to become an accountant, but allow him to attend his dream art college?

"If all that hadn't happened," David concluded, "you, Mr. Smith, would've been rotting away with loneliness and hatred, rummaging through paperwork in some dusty office. But instead, look at you now! Famous all around the world, your last painting sold for 1.4 million dollars, and you have a happy and loving family!"

"Don't even mention it, my friend," Mr. Smith nodded, "I can imagine so vividly what I could've ended up with if not for that day, when we went to the cinema with the girls. I escaped some fatal mistakes."

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David sighed, wishing he could go back in time and change his own past mistakes. Mr. Smith took out the silver watch. The hand of it was still fluttering furiously in one spot. That's when he understood what the mysterious object wanted him to do. That evening the two friends sat there for half an hour more, deep in their thoughts, watching the dancing flames in the fireplace.

The next day at exactly 9:00 am the doorbell rang. Mr. Smith flipped open the lid of the watch with a silver chain, glanced at its face for the last time, then closed it and carefully placed it in a brown box the size of a hamburger.

The delivery man picked up the parcel... the label on it spelled in a cursive: Oxford Street, 56-12, David Starman...