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your Highness, just before I sent them back to their homes?" Another laugh, as if at the best joke he'd heard in a lifetime. "They complained and said it wasn't fair. They hadn't known there was another wizard in the land to defeat their binding spell on me. They grumbled at our keeping it secret."

While it made the wizard laugh, it merely made the King look confused. "But, we don't have another wizard-

just you. I don't understand how--"

"But we do, your Majesty. Allow me to introduce my new apprentice to you." Garulean held out his hand to an astonished Tarn, who tried to keep her knees from shaking as she curtsied when the wizard pulled her forward and presented her to the court.

A Tale of the Time Askers

by *Brian D. Mazur*

I was eight years old when Grandpa spoke to me for the first time: "When you're asked the time, Joseph, answer twice." His voice wasn't loud, but the abruptness was so startling it was like a clap of thunder on a quiet summer night.

Up until that moment I hadn't understood his silence, I thought he was just a mean old man who didn't want to be bothered by anyone, not even family. On our weekly visits when Dad would cook and tidy up the house for him, Grandpa would just sit in his rocker, rain or shine, and say nothing at all.

Until that day.

It was a cool, mid-August evening and the days humidity still hung in the air, dampening my skin as I sat on Grandpa's old weathered picnic table. I sorted through my collection of baseball cards; Dad was inside the house doing his usual; and behind me, on the back porch, Grandpa gently rocked himself in his ancient wicker rocker.

The air filled with the gentle aromas of neighborhood barbecues as I became enthralled with Carl Yastrzemski's stats for the '72 season. It was here, through an opera of singing crickets, that Grandpa uttered those first words in a voice you might expect from an old sailor - low and gravelly. Looking up, I found that his face looked like it belonged with that seaman's voice too - the deep lines mapping the area around his eyes, cheeks and mouth; a weeks worth of gray whiskers shadowing his jowls. He appeared drawn and sullen as he looked down at me - a lifetime of sadness filling his eyes.

I felt numb with disbelief as he slowly sat next to me.

"There are those who ask not 'cause they want to know, they ask 'cause they *need* to know," he said, leaning closer. I sniffed for the ever present odor of liquor. His eyes grew wide. "I see your nose twitchin'. I'm sober boy and thinkin' with a clear head, thank you." I felt myself blush; I looked back down at Yaz. "I stayed away from Jack and Tom on purpose tonight, Joseph. I needed to talk to you with all my thoughts intact."

I fidgeted as my discomfort grew.

"Like I started to say, there are people who *need* to know the time. They ask for survival. Each time they ask

and receive an answer, it gives them life for another day." He carefully searched my face for a reaction. "I see by the look in your eyes, that either you don't believe me or you don't understand." He grunted.

"I was under the assumption that eight year old boys had good imaginations and believed anythin'. But it seems I have one here who proves that theory wrong. Well, boy, listen carefully and let me help you to believe."

I found myself listening more to what he was saying and less to the fact that he was talking to me at all.

"Your Grandma Martha was a 'Time Asker'. You didn't know her of course, she went away long before you were seed. Your Daddy didn't know her either," he said quietly, looking to the house. He cleared his throat and turned back to me. "Your Grandma was a fine, grand lady - so beautiful. She had short blonde hair," he said. "Looked like the place where the good Lord held the sunshine. Then there were those deep blue eyes, like bottomless pools, where once you looked into them, you were lost forever. Her skin was so fine and pure that you were almost afraid to touch her. She was flawless.

"All the boys in town came knocking at her door askin' for time with her. For some reason she chose me to give her time to. I never asked why, I just tried to give her as much as she gave me, that's all. Oh, I wasn't a drinker then, no sir, then it was church and the good Lord's ways. I felt she deserved a gentleman. Shoot, I even took a couple of lessons at 'Miss Polly's School of Etiquette'. But the fact is, I just never felt worthy of her. A lifetime of lessons would'nt've fixed that.

"Anyway, she was one of those people who were constantly askin' the time. No matter what we were doin' or where we were, she asked. Even durin' our weddin' ceremony, just before the 'I do's', politely as you please, she stopped the priest and asked me for the time. It was always the same time too, 7:30 p.m. sharp.

"We had two happy years together before your Daddy came along and added to our happiness. A fine healty baby boy he was, happy too. Hell, that boy came out of the womb laughin'.

"I was so taken with him that outside of my job, I

ignored everythin' else in my life. It was a wicked obsession, wicked. But I couldn't help myself, I loved that boy." His voice dropped lower. "Day after day, she still asked me the time, but now I answered her only on occasion. Most of the time not at all. I wanted your father to have everythin' I didn't, so I worked long days and nights to give him just that, everythin'. Because of that blind ignorance a weeks worth of days passed before I noticed that the hour of her usual askin' had come and gone without so much as a whisper from her.

"As your Daddy slept in his cradle I searched the house for her. I looked in her favorite spot, that same old rocker that I use, but she wasn't there. She wasn't in the laundry room or in the pantry organizin' her canned fruits and she wasn't in her garden tendin' her roses either. I found her in our bedroom, sittin' on our bed, her hands crossed in front of her." A tear ran down his cheek. "She was lookin' like a ghost. I could barely see her. The lace curtains that she made herself flapped in the breeze, as I saw right through her." He stopped for a moment.

Swallowing, he continued, "She couldn't speak. I could see her mouth movin', but no words came out. I didn't know what was goin' on. I didn't know what to say; didn't know what to do." He shook his head sadly. "She was meltin' away was what she was doin', and I was helpless to stop it. Tears welled up in her eyes as they seemed to cry out for me. When she completely faded away, my heart went with her.

"For days I tried to understand what happened. My sister Jessie took care of your Daddy so I could think and pull my life together.

"Slowly, I figured things out. Your Grandma's constant askin' of the time and my answerin', kept her alive. It nourished her like water nourishes the rest of us. That was why she picked me to love - I was the only one who answered her day after day and didn't ask why. She loved me for that - but when I stopped answerin' her, I betrayed that love."

His shoulders rounded over, he looked like he carried the sadness of the world on his back. My heart ached for him.

"Your Dad knows all this, of course. I made sure he knew, that he understood. I didn't want him makin' the same mistake. That's why I'm tellin' you, too."

"When someone asks you the time, say it twice." I repeated.

Nodding solemnly, he slowly stood up and shuffled his way back to the house and his rocker.

He spoke to me only on occasion after that:

"You bein' asked the time?" he would ask.

"Yes."

"You answerin' twice?"

"Yes, sir."

Then he would simply smile and go back to his drinking.

Every week for the rest of the summer, I would go to

his house hoping that he would speak to me some more; share another part of his heart. He never did.

Five years later, Grandpa died.

His story, and to no lesser degree, Grandpa himself, had changed my life. They picked it up and gently laid it down on a different path. The time that lie ahead, my adolescent years, were not filled with strife and rebellion, as all parents fear, but years of great compassion.

Over the years I went to his grave and sat on the cool grass in front of his stone to tell him what was happening in the lives of Dad, Mom and me. But most important, I would assure him that I was still answering twice to those who asked. My visits happened once a month until the eve I was to leave for college.

The evening was just like the one years ago at Grandpa's house: humidity clinging to my skin, the aroma of the barbecues wafting through the air, the sounds of the crickets in the grass and the creaking, somewhere, of a rocker rocking gently on old wood planks.

The setting sun pushed long finger like shadows from a nearby tree, across the face of the tombstone. The letters were rough, like Grandpa, the marble smooth like me. That contrast seemed appropriate.

As I sat with him, the evening seemed to change. The air got heavy, almost sad. I began to feel uncomfortable. Then there was the voice ...

"Joseph ..."

It was a gravelly whisper.

Familiar.

"Hello?" I called out, slowly turning around.

The air had become silent.

"Joseph ..."

Out in the distance, beyond the farthest gravestones, was a large Oak; it was so big that it seemed as if all I had to do was reach out to touch it. In front of it, under its immense shadow, stood a figure, unmoving; unrecognizable in the gray of the evening.

The leaves started to rustle on the Oak, slowly at first, then rapidly stronger until a wind burst from its branches. It blew straight at me, carrying with it a feeling of panic that screamed so loud I felt my legs go weak from fear.

Every other tree around was perfectly still. The wind seemed to come from the Oak itself. As it whirled and dipped over me the urgency it carried with it grew in volume; its pull was intoxicating. So I ran towards it - passing one tombstone after another until I was in the open field far beyond the dead of our ancestors.

I rapidly closed the distance, but it didn't seem fast enough; anxiety set in and I forced my legs to move even faster.

As I came upon the tree, the wind had all but stopped, and the dusk of the evening seemed to abate as the stranger was revealed to me: a girl, about my age, whose eyes were nothing more than lifeless black circles. Her hair, past her shoulders, bore no color at all, but gently framed a thin, pale face that presented skin so translucent you would have

thought it almost invisible. Even what she wore, a dress covered in tiny flowers, lacked the same vibrancy as the rest of her. It was like looking at an old black and white photograph.

I knew what she was.

I stepped to her and spoke the time.

A look of astonishment washed her face. "You know!" she said, her voice rising slightly, trembling.

I simply nodded.

Tears rimmed her eyes and I saw a spark of life deep in the black pools. Gently taking one of her hands in mine, I spoke the time again. This time she smiled.

She spoke softly, "My name is Lindsay."

I sat with her under the tree while time passed and life returned to her eyes. I held her through the night, talking, and as the orange and blues of the rising sun streaked the sky, I saw that her hair was not only soft and wavy but also red as strawberries, and her eyes, her eyes were the deepest green I had ever seen.

Sitting there with her, I came to realize what Grandfather felt for my Grandmother. The moment came so swiftly that it took my breath away as fast the feeling itself. I was in love.

We married less than a year later.

"Darling, the time please?" she asks, always waking me at two in the morning. A familiar peaceful glow washes over her face when I answer; a look that is immeasurably more satisfying than ever before.

We lived with my parents through college; an arrangement they gladly accepted. The first three years after graduation were spent building towards a future - saving money, building a house and finally talking about having kids.

Our family was born at once: A boy, Colin and a girl, Molly. From birth, Lindsay would whisper into Colin's ear. I would catch them from the corner of my eye, or if I had just entered a room. They always seemed to be remnants of a moment; a whisp of a shadow. I couldn't hear what was said, but I didn't have to - she was whispering the time. I didn't ask questions, I simply respected the privacy of their moments.

But still, I wanted so badly to be part of things. There was suddenly an inner circle to our lives; a place I couldn't go. I tried hard to understand, but ultimately didn't.

Then one night, after the children were in bed and as I threw another log onto the fire, Lindsay spoke to me about those moments.

"We-well, they're nice and snug," she started, awkwardly. "You can give them a kiss when you're done there."

"Great, I will."

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence as I poked the logs; behind me I sensed her shifting around

restlessly. Then, after what seemed like an eternity she said, "Please don't feel left out, darling. At the beginning of a Time Asker's life, only the Mother can fulfill the need."

I sat on the floor, my back resting against the couch, as she came around to sit next to me; we both stared into the fire.

"I thought that you knew. I'm sorry. But I promise, your time will come," she said.

"Molly isn't a Time Asker."

"No, she isn't." There was a brief silence, then, "I ..."

"... love you so much that I could just burst." I quickly added, with a smile. She looked at me and smiled back.

All was right with the world again.

As Lindsay had said, my time for Colin came, and it came quickly. He started asking me when he was just about two and since his time is 2:15 in the afternoon, I receive calls at work:

"Dayee, tom?"

My "Two-fifteen." is quickly followed by a squeal, then the sound of the handset hitting the floor as he skitters away.

As for Molly, Dad has already claimed dibs on the moment that she will be told about her Mother, brother and of course Great-Grandmother; a moment he promises to handle with compassion and sensitivity. A moment that I'm sure Grandpa will be watching.