

## A Matter of Time

By Caitlin E. Corrigan

Bailey eyed the clock. It was ten minutes to seven on Thursday night; they were due any second now.

They arrived almost late every week, Sandy speed-walking down the hall in a gray wool coat, and the unnamed heavysset man strolling behind her in jeans and a quilted plaid jacket. Breathless as usual, she would force a tight smile as she placed her worn winter boots on the counter. Bailey would shuffle towards the corner of the narrow room he stood in, and place the boots gingerly on a wooden shelf, then turn back to her with a pair of lady's figure skates, the blades usually dull from use, tucked under his arm. She'd already be rifling through a faded silk change-purse when he returned with the skates, and sometimes she'd be a little short of the three dollars they charged for rentals.

That's when she'd turn to the man in the plaid jacket, and ask in a strained singsong if he had thirty-five cents, or fifty cents, or maybe just a dime. He'd look at her with wide doe eyes and blink like he hadn't heard her, then shove a meaty hand in his pocket, making keys and change jingle about, and pull out a linty handful, searching for the right coins. She'd throw her hands up after only a second and make a frustrated "tsk!" sound, which was Bailey's cue to silently take her money and nod away the difference. Her smile would be gone by that point and she'd mutter a low "thank you" before hurrying off down the hallway towards the rink. She'd call out behind her shoulder that he needed to pick her up in a half an hour, no later, her voice echoing on the cold cement walls. "I love you too, Sandy!" he'd call back bitterly, then turn to Bailey to count out the rest of the money.

Bailey sighed. The rental room smelled terrible, nothing like the rink, which at least had the sharpness of the cold air to stun the nose out of smelling the curious stink of wet rubber mats. Here, sweat, feet, stale water and cigarette smoke combined to create a stench that made Bailey think of a mildewing refrigerator filled with soggy butts. He rested his lined chin in the palm of one pale hand and bent his head slightly forward, trying to inhale the smell of the pipe tobacco in his pocket instead. Time seemed to be passing quickly tonight; he would be off work in less than two hours. The prospect of evening loomed ahead of him as it always did; a sprawling empty space he was obliged to fill before his body wound down to sleep. He folded his arms tight against his torso, feeling the weakness of his muscles beneath the smooth fabric of his red flannel shirt.

A few smirking pre-teen girls came up to the counter to get skates, barely looking at Bailey as they paid, cracking their gum and twirling strands of permed hair. He saw them every week, like he saw everyone who took skating lessons at Creekside Community Rink, and he could probably count the number of times they made eye contact on one hand. Walking to the bus stop after the rink had closed, he would see them boldly sharing a cigarette and talking with

the high school hockey players while they waited for their mothers to pick them up in station wagons and mini-vans. He always felt strange walking past them, as if he should put out their cigarettes and button the top buttons of their too-tight blouses. He felt them watching as he passed, noticing the choppiness of his arthritic gait and snickering softly, in their ignorance. He was old enough to be their grandfather, and for some reason—maybe it was because he had never been anyone’s grandfather—the thought was particularly unsettling.

Bailey rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. He could smell the old leather of the skates and the earthy dampness of the dollar bills that passed through his hands as he brought his fingers to his face to rub the shallow hollows beneath his eyes. He was starting to get headaches more often. Dull, throbbing facial headaches that started in his nose, spread to his eyes and cheeks, and made his whole head feel like a rock resting heavy on his shoulders. The last time his headaches had been this bad, he had given in and gotten a pair of five dollar reading glasses at the grocery store, and wore them while he poured over his jigsaw puzzle pieces each night. Bailey had completed all twenty-seven of his 1,000 piece puzzles and done several of his thirteen 500 piece puzzles twice or even three times. He got them at garage sales on the weekends and had amassed a pretty impressive collection, all of which now sat in a neat, but dusty pile in a corner of his apartment. But he hadn’t done puzzles for at least a year now; it hurt his eyes too much, even with the cheap glasses, and he knew he couldn’t afford a good pair with prescription lenses.

The mechanical click of the clock hands on the wall brought Bailey back into the present, and he squinted up at the bold numbers. 7:56. The warm-ups for the eight o’clock lesson were already beginning. Maybe Sandy was running late, or maybe they weren’t coming at all. It was strange how he looked forward to his little brushes with the lives of strangers, he knew that. For him it was fascinating in a sense, like real life soap operas played out every week, always different, always the same. Sandy and the nameless man were his favorites. They made him sad, like the parts in movies where two people who need to meet miss each other by seconds. He waited every Thursday for Sandy to give the man a real smile and a goodbye kiss before heading down the rubber-matted hall, but it never happened. He half hoped that the man would talk to him after she left, just lean on the counter and tell Bailey all about their life together and their problems and his love for her. Instead, the man would always just give him a knowing look, and sometimes a comment like, “Huh! Women!” and be on his way.

Bailey shifted a little on the rickety wooden stool he sat on. Some college kid who had worked here a few years ago had painted it in lively shades of green and blue. It was cheap paint on a cheap stool however, and it was beginning to flake off little by little, leaving Bailey with crumbs of technicolor paint on his black wool pants. He picked up the creased newspaper that sat on a red milk crate underneath the counter and used it to brush some of the paint off his thighs. Someone from the earlier shift had left the paper folded open to the advice section. He scanned the columns without actually reading them, then turned the paper over to the next page.

There was a letter to the editor featured along with the opinions and political cartoons and he skimmed it briefly, mildly surprised to read it was about his neighborhood. The three big apartment buildings overlooking the park had become overrun with young twenty-something kids, forcing out the respectable, working families of years past, lamented the author. Bailey

managed a wry smile and nodded in agreement. She was right, he lived in one of those buildings. The sounds of smashing bottles and loud music were a staple in his life, but he barely heard them anymore and the kids let him be. He was never concerned for his safety; they were all too young and too drunk on the idea of independence to bother him. He just made his way quietly up the stairs each night, top floor, left side, number six.

Bailey turned the paper over once again to fold it correctly, but a picture in the upper left hand corner caught his eye. He peered closely at a grainy snapshot of a smiling man with a large, caring face. It was the man in the plaid jacket. Bailey squinted harder, and pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose to read the paragraph of small type beneath the picture. "James Leary, 44, passed suddenly in his home Monday evening of an apparent heart attack. He is survived by his mother, three siblings, and his wife, Sandra Leary." The paragraph went on to note the funeral home and the hours of open visitation: 7-9, Thursday night. Bailey frowned, and without really knowing why he was doing it, carefully tore the announcement out of the newspaper. He repeated the name of the funeral home in his head, and then out loud, before recognizing it as the one he passed daily while walking from the bus stop to the rink, some two blocks away.

Bailey's eyes darted up to the clock on the wall once more. Now it was a few minutes past eight. Lessons would be over in less than a half an hour, followed by the rush of skate returns, and then he'd be off. There wasn't much to clean up, since he usually counted the money in the register during the lesson, and he could probably make it out of there by twenty to nine. Plenty of time to stop in for the last five minutes and offer condolences, he thought. Bailey put the newspaper back on the crate and began to count the money.

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The air outside was bitter and biting and Bailey clutched the top of his coat where the two first buttons were missing. His hands were numb with cold and shaking slightly as he stood on the sidewalk, gazing up at the large stone house with the simple, block-lettered sign in front: "Lester Funeral Home". He could see lights glowing cozily beyond the heavy curtains, and the thought of a warm room spurred him into action, carrying his plodding feet up the cement steps from the sidewalk and through the heavy front door.

As he clicked the door closed, the flow of hushed murmurs met his ears like a tiny waterfall. As he entered, he saw an archway to his right where the voices seemed to be coming from, and he sheepishly stepped through it into the next room. People were gathered in small clumps, all wearing their coats and looking as if they were about to go. Some had red eyes and blotchy cheeks, but most of the people Bailey saw wore tired, trying smiles, convincing each other it was now okay to go home.

He saw Sandy almost immediately. She was seated in a striped armchair saying goodbye to a woman about Bailey's age, with short white curls and a tailored navy suit. Bailey suddenly felt very underdressed in his too-big green parka and red ski hat. He considered just turning around to go, but at that moment, Sandy looked up and caught his eye, holding his gaze. She looked at him blankly at first, and then a trace of recognition passed over her face and she fixed

him with a more quizzical stare. Bailey's dry lips parted and he swallowed once before attempting to speak.

"Just wanted to offer my uh...my..." he paused and felt his face grow warm, "wanted to just offer my...condolences. Yes, wanted to offer my condolences to you Mrs. Leary." The name tumbled out of his mouth awkwardly and he felt his face go red, his desire to leave growing stronger by the second.

Sandy's face issued a tiny tight smile. "Thank you." Her face was pale, but pretty, and she looked vulnerable, like a small child.

"I'll miss seeing him come in with you every week."

Her eyes grew watery and she looked away, blinking rapidly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"No," she said, regaining composure. "No, it's okay." She looked up at him again and was struck by how different she looked when she wasn't angry or in a rush. He felt he had to say something before he could leave and let her be.

"He, uh, he reminded me of my son you know."

Sandy looked up at him quickly.

"Yes, my son. He passed away three years ago. Car accident. Left his wife and two children just...heartbroken." He cleared his throat. "That's why I was so upset to see the notice in the paper. Seeing your husband every week, it reminded me..." He trailed off, embarrassed and angry with himself for lying to a grieving woman.

"Hm..." murmured Sandy.

She looked up again and they made eye contact once more. Her eyes were clear, sharp and appraising, and he looked down immediately, awkwardly fidgeting and toying with the frayed thread at the top of his coat. She knew he had lied, he thought, she would throw him out. His face burned once more beneath the hat, and he dared a glimpse at her face. To his surprise, her face had become calm, even tranquil.

"If you'll excuse me...it's almost nine and before I leave I need to speak with the, undertaker."

He heard her voice catch slightly on the word.

"Thank you again for coming." She rose and offered her hand for him to shake. It felt warm and soft beneath his cold rough palm. "And I'm sorry about your son."

He nodded, surprised and confused at her response, at the hot tears that he felt forming for this non-existent son of his, or maybe they were for James, or Sandy, or himself.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She lowered her eyes and let his hand go, after giving it an almost imperceptible little squeeze. She left the room, leaving him, he realized, alone. The other people had left sometime during their brief conversation and he was now by himself in the artificially cheery room. He looked out the window at the dark blue clouds and the bare tree branches whipping in the wind, and shivered at the thought of going out to that lonely bus stop and riding home to his drafty apartment.

He walked to the door and left the building silently, pulling the door shut with a soft sscchhu. The air outside was as cold as it had been when he came in, but something in him felt warmed, even slightly, by Sandy’s kindness. The tears at the edges of his pale eyes were still there, and as he braced himself against the cold at the bus stop, he breathed deeply and sighed, feeling his cheeks grow warm and damp with release. He made a few small child sniffing noises, then shoved one hand into his pocket, digging around for the crumpled bus schedule he kept along with tissues and loose change in his coat pocket. He brought the creased paper to his face and squinted to find the next departure time in the flickering streetlight, then shoved the schedule back into his pocket and wiped his nose with a soiled tissue. He raised his wrist and pressed the small button on the side of his watch to light up its luminescent face in the darkness. Ten minutes after nine on a Thursday night; it was due any second now.