

Delivery Day

The clock *is* fast. Very fast. I stare at the red second hand ticking in slow circles around the face, and I count Mississippis just like they taught us to do in kindergarten. I look at the digital clock on the computer monitor, then back at the large round one high on the wall across the Emergency Room lobby. The wall clock is more than five minutes ahead of the computer.

The burly black man with the thick, salt-and-pepper mustache had delivered packages for UPS for years, and I didn't know his name. He came to the hospital once, twice, sometimes three times a week, carrying boxes of office supplies and medical equipment or picking up outgoing shipments. I was always the one to sign his electronic clipboard. He always smiled at me, and he always told me to have a great day, and I always said, "you too" or even sometimes "stay dry out there" if it was raining. But I never once asked him who he was.

I stare at the clock. Before I finish *three-Mississippi*, the second hand starts its fourth tick. It never ran fast before today.

"Clock's fast," the UPS man said with a nod toward the wall, not two hours before. He was the first to notice. It was about four minutes ahead then. I looked up from opening a package and chuckled and said, "Oh, so it is." He said, "I can fix that for you real quick, if you like," and without waiting for an answer, he dragged a blue plastic chair with metal legs noisily across the waiting room floor. An elderly lady with sharp eyes and smeared red lipstick frowned.

The phone rings, and I jump a little in my swivel chair. The UPS man delivered that chair last year. It's ergonomic with built-in lumbar support. The phone rings a second time. I answer. It's a woman wanting the pediatric department. The switchboard operator transferred her to the ER by mistake. She spends the time it would have taken me to make the correct transfer to tell me the entire hospital is incompetent. I apologize and send the call to pediatrics. I look at the computer, then back at the wall clock. It's six full minutes ahead now.

The blue chair wobbled when the UPS man stepped up onto it, first with one heavy foot, holding the chair's back for support, then with the other. It wobbled again when he took his hand off the chair and stood. The man was over six feet tall, but the clock was still just out of his reach. He stretched his arms along the wall and lifted the heels of his steel-toed work boots. The lady with the red lipstick shook her head disapprovingly. The plastic of the chair seat cracked loudly, and one moment the man was in the air, grasping madly for a hold; the next he was on his back on the tile floor, blood beginning to pool from the cut where his temple had brushed past the corner of the coffee table, the one with all the magazines.

I stare at the clock across the room. It's lunch time, or it will be in six minutes when the rest of the world catches up to this abomination of a timepiece. I wonder if the man brought his lunch with him to work today. I imagine a cellophane-wrapped sandwich, maybe a bag of chips and an apple, in the glove compartment of the UPS truck, roasting in the summer heat.

The cut from the table wasn't what killed him. It wasn't even that bad; heads just bleed a lot. What killed him was the blunt force trauma from the back of his head smashing

into the hard tile floor from an eight-foot fall. In the middle of an Emergency Room waiting area. On an otherwise uneventful Tuesday morning. Four doctors and a dozen nurses were on the other side of the wall behind me. Two paramedics were standing near the sliding glass doors, talking to the security guard about the Cubs game, not fifty feet away. Even they couldn't get to the UPS man in time to save him.

I look at the clock without really seeing it anymore. I wonder if the man has a family. I think he was in his fifties. He could have a wife and kids, maybe even grandbabies. I try to remember if he had been wearing a wedding ring. I never noticed. I wonder if the doctors found a wallet in his pocket, if they know his name now. I wonder if they called anybody yet. I think maybe someone should call UPS. I wonder if it should be me.

The man drove a UPS truck in downtown Chicago. He could have died from a car crash or from getting shot or from falling off the Sears Tower or from a heart attack. Instead, he fell off a chair and hit his head on the floor because of a goddamn clock. The paramedics lifted him onto a gurney and wheeled him away. A trauma counselor brought the sharp-eyed old lady a cup of water and awkwardly patted her shoulder while the janitorial staff cleaned up the blood.

The clock is six-and-a-half minutes ahead now. I wonder if I can knock it down by throwing my stapler at it. My hand is reaching for the stapler when a nurse practitioner appears beside me. He sets a worn leather wallet on the desk along with a set of keys. There's a Bugs Bunny key chain from Six Flags. I open the wallet. The black man with the salt-and-pepper mustache smiles from inside. His name was Curtis. Curtis could have died a hundred different ways two weeks or six months or forty years from now. But he died today. I guess when it's your time, it's your time. But what if the clock runs fast?