

George Dalloway's Extraordinary Day

Long before he opened his eyes he was conscious. He knew the clock beside him said 4:50. It was set for 5 a.m. but it never went off in the morning. George's internal clock always stirred him, even on weekends, when he would acknowledge the time, mentally check the day, and roll back over.

George was fascinated by his own preoccupation with time. He had frequent dreams about time. He would envision the clock face, briefly bring himself to awareness, turn over, and the clock would be within 15 minutes of the image in his mind.

Mostly, he willed himself to push the alarm button before the buzzing woke up his wife. She slept so fitfully now, always tired during the day, especially now with her malaise.

He lay there, warm in the covers and the heat from her back. He let the day's schedule run through his mind. Every day was nearly identical, but it helped him to focus and allowed him to savor those first few moments of his morning.

George Dalloway slid silently out from under the sheets, careful not to disturb her. Gently, he pulled the comforter back across her shoulders. His hand rested there for an instant before, reluctantly, he broke the connection.

He slipped on his house shoes which were waiting like aged sentinels at the foot of the bed. He took his ratty but substantial robe from the end post and shivered as he felt its accumulated cold. Keeping the thermostat turned off at night was the only way to stay within their utility budget.

He made his way quietly down the stairs. At over 200 pounds, he still moved as stealthily as a ninja. Ironically, his wife, who was half his size, thundered about the house like a baby elephant. But this was the time George cherished most, when all things were possible, before promise became disappointment, when chores had a purpose—making the coffee and toast, taking out the trash, emptying and replenishing the dishwasher.

He filled his cup halfway and ran a little water into it. The first sip of the day can't be too hot or overpowering. He set it on a coaster (always on a coaster) by his worn recliner in the living room and turned on his 40 watt reading lamp. He took a drink and sat perfectly still, the cup bringing his arthritic hands to life. He listened to the house waking up. Yes, this was a moment to treasure.

He refilled his mug and was ready to face the morning's headlines. Quietly, he opened the front door, turning on the porch light just long enough to spot where the delivery boy might have hidden the paper. His neighbors burned their lights all night—artificially convinced it provided protection from dark intruders. But George couldn't afford either the constant bulb replacement or the electricity. Besides, he knew where the shadows dwelled.

There was a brisk chill in the air that stung his lungs, but not unpleasantly. The lawn was covered by a heavy frost—the promise of fall grudgingly giving way to winter. This fuzzy, white domain waited patiently for the rising sun to spirit it away. His shoes got progressively wetter as he searched the porch and the driveway for the paper, finally spotting its blue plastic cover near the rear tire—the one with the slow leak he had to keep filling every morning.

He closed the door but heard the floor above creak, as if his wife had stirred into the spot he had vacated. When she was diagnosed seven months ago, he promised her he would be more attentive, more responsive to her needs. So a good day was followed by two bad ones, then a brief respite, and the cycle would begin again. The good days seemed fewer now.

George Dalloway had a specific paper-reading ritual. He first discarded all the ad inserts, the Business and Home sections. He would look only at the back of the Local piece to see what the weather foretold for that day. He liked only “partly cloudy and mild.” Next, he would give a cursory run through the Entertainment part, although nothing much excited him anymore. They hadn’t gone out to a movie in years. Sports was his favorite and he would devour every story, except soccer and hockey, which he didn’t understand and thought boring. The Front section was always last—something he had to work up to. There was never any good news, and the letters only solidified his belief that ninety-nine percent of the public were morons.

He never spent more than ten minutes in the bathroom before leaving for work. A fast shave with a three-month-old blade and a minimum of cream. Then patiently rolling the tube down to the dollop of toothpaste. And out the door, easing it closed silently behind him.

On a good day George would find a space in the general employees’ parking lot. Since there was only one spot for every ten workers he rarely found a place. Once before he had parked in the named reserved place of someone he knew was on vacation, but the guy came back to check his mail, complained to security, and George got written up.

Most days he had to park on the street somewhere within a three-block radius. On a bad

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day he would have to leave his car in one of two public lots six blocks away and at a cost of \$10.00. On rainy days he *always* had to park there.

George was a glorified paper pusher. He arrived at his cubicle ten minutes early, hung his jacket over the back of his chair, and rolled up his sleeves to hide the frayed cuffs.

This was his typical day. He would open a file, correct the overnight total, figure the additions and subtractions, compute a new total, factor in the interest, recalculate the amount and save it. Then he'd move on to the next one. The company had hired some outside efficiency expert to determine exactly how long it should take George to do one file and had assigned him the number of accounts he should complete every day.

His phone would ring 9.25 times a day. Occasionally he'd be called to another part of the building to trouble-shoot some problem. George looked forward to these welcomed interruptions of his routine. But if it took too long, he'd have to eat his lunch at his desk while he got caught up. The company paid no overtime.

Usually, when on schedule, he'd eat lunch alone in a corner of the break room. The turnover rate for any employee was about 18 months. George had been there twelve years and never bothered to learn any new names. He would get a milk out of the vending machine, a juice if his blood sugar was low, and take his lunch out of his well-worn paper bag. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays his sandwich would be peanut butter and jelly; Tuesdays and Thursdays he got whatever his wife fixed for herself on Monday—usually tuna salad or meatloaf. There was always an oatmeal cookie with raisins. The only surprise change in his menu was the fruit she packed—an apple, orange or banana—and the rare, pleasant substitution of a pear.

Today proved to be no different than any other for George.

His evening rituals were also the same. He and wife would take turns making simple but substantial meals which they would eat off trays in front of the television. With an occasional bathroom break, George would sit next to her as she watched her shows—not because he cared about them (how could anybody watch *The Good Wife*?) but because he cared about her.

Precisely at 9:00 she rose from the couch, passed behind his lounge, wrapped her arms around him for ten seconds, kissed him on the top of his thinning hair, and shuffled her way off to bed.

He muted the TV volume so as to not disturb her. For awhile he flipped through the channels, imagining the conversations the beautiful people were having in the box. When the news came on he hit the remote and the silent room got darker. He picked up a well-worn paperback he kept on his end table—a story about a young Southern girl and her brother coming of age, and a mysterious neighborhood stranger who saved their lives. He'd always wanted to be as good a father as the one in the book. But they never had any children.

When he felt sleep approaching, he replaced his mark, closed the book, turned off the light and made his way up the creaking steps. He slid as quietly as a ghost next to his wife. Placing his arm around her, she moved unconsciously slightly closer to him. He knew he would soon be sleeping alone. A tear welled in his eye, but he fought it back.

Eventually his mind drifted and sleep embraced him like the darkness he longed for. Extraordinarily, George Dalloway had survived another day.

