### Writing Time

Isaac Asimov

George said, “I once knew someone a little like you.”

We had a window seat at the small restaurant where we were having lunch, and George was looking out pensively.

I said, “That's astonishing. I should have thought I was unique.”

“You are,” said George. “The man I am referring to was only a *little* like you. For the ability to scribble, scribble, scribble while keeping the brain totally detached, you stand alone.”

“Actually,” I said, “I use a word processor.”

“I use the word ‘scribble,’ ” said George loftily, “in what a real writer would understand as the metaphorical sense.” Then he paused over his chocolate mousse to sigh dramatically.

I knew the sign. “You're going to tell me one of your flights of fancy concerning Azazel, aren't you, George?”

He looked at me scornfully, “You've been flying your own fancy so long and so limply, you don't know the ring of truth when you hear it. But never mind. It is too sad a tale to tell you.”

“Except that you're going to anyway, aren't you?”

George sighed again.

It's that bus stop out there [said George] that reminds me of Mordecai Sims, who made a moderate living for himself by turn­ing out endless reams of variegated trash. Not as much as you do, of course, and not as trashy, which is why he is only a little like you. To do him justice, I occasionally read some of his material and found them quite so-so. Without meaning to hurt your feelings, you've never reached that mark — at least accord­ing to reports, for I have never been quite low enough in my mind to read you myself.

Mordecai was different from you in another respect; he was terribly impatient. Observe yourself in the mirror over there, assuming you have no objection to being reminded of what you look like, and see how you sit here carelessly, one arm thrown over the back of the chair and the rest of you slumped into casual shapelessness. One would never think, to look at you, that you had any concern as to whether your daily quota of ran­domly typed paper would be turned out or not.

Mordecai was not like that. He was always conscious of his deadlines — behind which he was in perpetual danger of falling.

I lunched with him regularly every Tuesday in those days and he tended to make the experience a hideous one with his chatter. “I've got to have that piece in the mail by tomorrow morning at the latest,” he would say, “and I've got to do a bit of revision on another piece first, and I just don't have the time. Where the devil is that check? Why doesn't the waiter show up? What do they do with themselves in the kitchen? Have swimming contests in the gravy?”

He was always particularly impatient with respect to the check, and I would fear that he might bolt, leaving it behind for me to evade, somehow. To do him justice that never happened, but the feeling that it might tended to spoil the meal.

Or look at that bus stop out there. I have been observing it for fifteen minutes. You'll notice that no bus has come and that it is a windy day with a late fall nip to the air. What we see are collars turned up, hands thrust into pockets, noses turning red or blue, feet being shuffled for warmth. What we don't see is any rebellion in the ranks, any fists waved angrily to heaven. All those waiting there are broken into passivity by the injustice of life.

Not Mordecai Sims. If he were in that bus line, he would be dashing out into the road to survey the distant horizon for any sign of a vehicle; he would be growling and snarling and waving his arms; he would be urging a mass march on City Hall. He would, in short, be depleting his adrenal glands.

Many's the time he turned to me with his complaints, at­tracted, as so many are, by my cool air of competence and un­derstanding.

“I am a busy man, George,” he would say rapidly. He always talked rapidly. “It's a shame, a scandal, and a crime the way the world conspires against me. I had to drop in at a hospital for some routine tests — God knows why except that my doctor fool­ishly thinks he has to make a living — and I was told at arrive at 9:40 a.m. at such and such a desk.

“I got there at 9:40 a.m. precisely, of course, and on the desk in question was a sign saying: ‘Open for business at 9:30 a.m.’ That is what it said George — in English without a letter out of place. Behind the desk, however, there was no one.

“I checked my watch and said to someone who looked hang­dog enough to be a hospital attendant. ‘Where,’ I said, ‘is the nameless villain who should be behind that desk?”

“Not here yet,’ said the lowborn knave.

“It says this place is open for business at 9:30 a.m.”

“Someone will be here sooner or later, I guess,’ he answered with a vicious indifference.

“It was, after all, a hospital. I might be dying. Did anyone care? No! I had a deadline looming for an important item I had expended half my guts on, something that would earn me enough money to pay my doctor's bill (assuming I had nothing better to spend it on, which wasn't likely). Did anyone care? No! It was not till 10:04 that someone showed up, and when I rushed to the desk, that belated devil stared at me haughtily and said, ‘You'll have to wait your turn.’ ”

Mordecai was full of stories like that; of banks of elevators in which every single one was moving slowly upward while he waited in the lobby; of people who lunched from twelve to three-thirty and began their four-day weekends on Wednesday when­ever he needed to consult them.

“I don't see why anyone bothered to invent time, George,” he would say. “It's just a device to make possible the formation of novel methods of wastage. Do you realize that if I could convert the hours I must spend waiting on the convenience of assorted malapert varlets into writing time for myself, I could increase my output by anywhere from ten to twenty percent. Do you further realize that, despite the criminal parsimony of publish­ers, that would mean a corresponding increase in my income? — Where is that miserable check?”

I could not help but think it would be a kindly deed to help him increase his income, since he had the good taste to spend some of it on me. What's more, he had a way of selecting first-class places at which to dine, and that warmed my heart. — No, not like this one, old fellow. Your taste falls far short of what it ought to be, as, I am told, one can tell from your writing.

I therefore began to stir my powerful mind for ways to help him.

I did not immediately think of Azazel. In those days, I had not yet grown accustomed to him; after all, a two-centimeter-tall demon *is* a little out of the ordinary.

Eventually, though, it occurred to me to wonder whether Azazel could do anything about building up someone's writing time. It didn't seem likely and I might be just wasting his time, but what's time to an otherworldly creature?

I went through the necessary routine of ancient spells and incantations to call him forth from wherever it is he comes, and he arrived asleep. His tiny eyes were closed and there was a high-pitched hum coming from him that rose and fell in an irregular and unpleasant fashion. It may have been the equiva­lent of a human snore.

I wasn't sure how one went about waking him, and finally I decided to allow a drop of water to fall on his stomach. He had a perfectly spherical abdomen, you know, as though he had swal­lowed a ball bearing. I haven't the slightest idea of whether that is the norm on his world, but once when I mentioned it he demanded to know what a ball bearing was and then, when I explained, he threatened to zapulniclate me. I didn't know what that meant, but from the tone of his voice I gathered it was something unpleasant.

The drop of water did wake him, and he was absurdly an­noyed, too. He kept talking about having been half drowned and went into tedious detail as to the proper method of waking one up on his world. It was something about dancing and flower petals and soft, musical instruments and the touch of the fingers of gorgeous dancing maidens. I told him that on our world we just played garden hoses on each other and he made some re­mark about ignorant barbarians and eventually cooled down suf­ficiently to allow me to talk sense to him.

I explained the situation and I rather thought that, without more ado, he would say a few words of gibberish and that would be that.

He did no such thing. Instead he looked grave and said, “See here, you are asking me to interfere with the laws of probability.”

I was pleased that he had grasped the situation. “Exactly,” I said.

“But that's not easy,” he said.

“Of course not,” I said. “Would I ask you to do it if it were easy? If it were easy I'd do it myself. It's only when it's not easy that I have to call on someone as magnificently superior as your­self.”

Nauseating, of course, but essential when you deal with a demon who is as sensitive about his height as about his ball­bearing belly.

He looked gratified at my logic and said, “Well, I don't say it's *impossible.”*

“Good.”

“It would require an adjustment of the Jinwhipper continuum of your world.”

“Exactly. You took the words out of my mouth.”

“What I will have to do is introduce a few nodes in the inter­connection of the continuum with your friend, the one with the deadlines. What are deadlines, by the way?”

I tried to explain and he said, with a windy little suspiration, “Ah, yes, we have such things in our more ethereal demonstra­tions of affection. Allow a deadline to pass and the dear little creatures never let you hear the end of it. I remember once —”

But I will spare you the sordid details of his insignificant sex life.

“The only thing is,” he said finally, “that once I introduce the nodes, I won't be able to undo them.”

“Why not?”

Azazel said, with elaborate casualness. “Theoretically impos­sible, I'm afraid.”

I didn't believe that at all. It was just that the miserable little incompetent didn't know how. Still, since he was quite compe­tent enough to make life impossible for me, I did not let him know I had seen through his charade, but simply said, “You won't have to undo it. Mordecai is after additional writing time and once he has it he will be satisfied for life.”

“In that case I shall do it.”

For a long time, he made passes. It looked like something a magician would do, except that his hands seemed to flicker and turn invisible now and then for shorter or longer intervals. They were so small, to be sure, it was hard to tell whether they were visible or not even under normal circumstances.

“What are you doing?” I asked, but Azazel shook his head, and his lips moved as though he were counting.

Then, apparently finished, he lay back on the table and panted.

I said, “Is it done?”

He nodded and said, “I hope you realize I had to lower his entropy quotient more or less permanently.”

“What does that mean?'\*

“It means that things will be a little more orderly in his neigh­borhood than one should suspect.”

“Nothing wrong with being orderly,” I said. (You might not think it, old fellow, but I have always believed in being orderly. I keep an accurate list of every cent I owe you. The details are on innumerable scraps of paper that are here and there in my apart­ment. You can have them any time you want them.)

Azazel said, “Of course there's nothing wrong with being or­derly. It's just that you can't really defy the second law of ther­modynamics. It means that things will be a little *less* orderly elsewhere in order to restore the balance.”

“In what way?” I said, checking my zipper. (One can never be too careful.)

“In various ways, mostly unnoticeable. I've spread the effect through the solar system, so that there will be a few more aster­oid collisions than would ordinarily take place, a few more erup­tions on Io, and so on. Mostly, it's the sun that will be affected.”

“How?”

“I estimate it will get hot enough to make life on Earth impos­sible about two and a half million years sooner than it would have before I noded the continuum.”

I shrugged. What are a few million years when it's a question of having someone pick up my dinner checks with that cheerful disposition one likes to see?

It was about a week afterward that I once again dined with Mordecai. He seemed rather excited as he checked his coat, and when he arrived at the table where I was waiting patiently with my drink, he smiled brilliantly.

“George,” he said, “what an unusual week I have had.” He held his hand up without looking and did not seem at all sur­prised when a menu was placed in it. Mind you, this was a restaurant at which the waiters, a haughty and imperious lot, gave out no menus without an application in triplicate that had been countersigned by the manager.

Mordecai said, “George, everything has been going like clock­work.”

I suppressed a smile. “Indeed?”

“When I walk into the bank, there's an empty window and a smiling cashier. When I walk into the post office, there's an empty window and — well, I guess you wouldn't actually expect a post office employee to smile, but at least he registered a letter of mine with scarcely any snarl at all. The buses drive up as I arrive, and I barely had my hand up in yesterday's rush hour when a taxi swerved and stopped for me. A checker cab, too. When I asked to be taken to Fifth and Forty-ninth, he took me there, showing every sign he knew the layout of the streets of the city. He even spoke English. —What would you like to have, George?”

A glance at the menu was sufficient. Apparently it was ar­ranged that even I should not delay him. Mordecai then tossed his menu to one side and proceeded to give the order for both of us rapidly. I noticed that he did not look up to see whether a waiter was actually at his side. He had already grown accus­tomed to assume one would be.

And one was.

The waiter rubbed his hands together, bowed, and proceeded to serve the meal with celerity, grace, and efficiency.

I said, “You do seem to be having the most amazing streak of luck, Mordecai, my friend. How do you account for it?” (I must admit that I had a passing thought that I might make him be­lieve I was responsible. After all, if he knew that, would he not surely shower me with gold, or, in these debased times, with paper?)

“Simple,” he said, tucking his napkin into his shirt collar and seizing his knife and fork in a death grip, for Mordecai, with all his virtues, was not one of your dainty feeders. “It's not luck at all. It's the inevitable result of the workings of chance.”

“Of *chance?”* I said indignantly.

Mordecai said, “Certainly. I have spent my whole life endur­ing the most miserable series of fortuitous delays that the world has ever seen. The laws of chance make it necessary that such an unbroken fund of misfortune be made up for, and that's what's happening now, and should continue to be happening for the rest of my life. I expect it to. I have confidence. Everything is balancing out.” He leaned toward me and tapped me on the chest in a most unpleasant way. “Depend upon it. You can't defy the laws of probability.”

He spend the entire meal lecturing me on the laws of probabil­ity, concerning which, I am sure, he actually knew as little as you do.

I finally said, “Surely all this gives you more writing time?”

“Obviously,” he said. “I estimate that my writing time has increased by twenty percent.”

“And your output has gone up correspondingly, I imagine.”

“Well,” he said a little uncomfortably, “not just yet, I'm afraid. Naturally, I have to adjust. I'm not quite used to getting things done so quickly. It took me by surprise.”

Frankly, he didn't look surprised to me. He lifted his hand and, without looking, plucked the bill from the fingers of the waiter who was just approaching with it. He glanced at it curso­rily and handed it back, with a credit card, to the waiter who had actually waited for it and who then left on the double.

The entire dinner had taken a little over thirty minutes. I will not hide from you the fact that I would have preferred a civilized two and a half hours, with champagne preceding, brandy suc­ceeding, a fine wine or two separating the courses, and cultured conversation filling all the interstices. However, on the bright side was the fact that Mordecai had saved two hours which he could spend money-grubbing for himself and, to an extent, for me.

As it happened, I didn't see Mordecai for three weeks or so after that dinner. I don't remember why that was, but I rather suspect it was one of those occasions in which we took turns being out of town.

At any rate, I was just emerging one morning from a coffee shop at which I sometimes partake of a roll and scrambled eggs, when I saw Mordecai standing at the corner about half a block away.

It was a miserable day of wet snow — the kind of day on which empty taxis approach you only in order to send a spray of dark gray slush over your pants legs as they shoot past you and turn on their off-duty signs.

Mordecai had his back to me and was just raising his hand when an empty taxi rolled cautiously toward him. To my aston­ishment, Mordecai looked away. The taxi lingered, then crawled off, disappointment written across the face of its windshield.

Mordecai raised his hand a second time and, from nowhere at all, a second taxi appeared and stopped for him. He got in but, as I could clearly hear even from a distance of forty yards, he did so with a ringing set of expletives not fit to be heard by anyone of tender upbringing, assuming that any such remain in the city.

I phoned him later than morning and arranged to have cock­tails with him at a friendly bar we knew that featured one “Happy Hour” after another the whole day long. I could hardly wait, for I simply had to have an explanation from him.

What I wanted to know was the meaning of the expletives he used. —No, old fellow, I don't mean the dictionary meaning of the words, assuming they can be found in the dictionary. I meant why he should have used them at all. By all rights, he should have been ecstatically happy.

When he entered the bar, he was not looking noticeably happy. In fact, he looked distinctly haggard.

He said, “Signal for the waitress, will you, George?”

It was one of those bars where the waitresses were dressed without any undue regard for warmth, which, of course, helped keep *me* warm. I signaled for one gladly, even though I knew she would interpret my gestures as merely signifying a desire to place an order for a drink.

In actual fact, she didn't interpret it at all, for she ignored me by keeping her very bare back firmly to me.

I said, “Really, Mordecai, if you want service, you'll have to signal yourself. The laws of probability have not yet bestirred themselves on my behalf; which is a shame, for it is long past time for my rich uncle to die and to disinherit his son in my favor.”

“You have a rich uncle?” asked Mordecai, with a flicker of interest.

“No! And that only makes the whole thing even more unjust. Signal for a drink, will you, Mordecai?”

“The hell with it,” said Mordecai grumpily. “Let them wait.”

It was not *them* waiting that bothered me, of course, but my curiosity overcame my thirst.

“Mordecai,” I said, “you seem unhappy. In fact, although you didn't see me this a.m., I saw you. You actually ignored an empty taxi on a day when they were worth their weight in gold and then swore somewhat when you took a second.”

Mordecai said, “Is that so? Well, I'm tired of those bastards. Taxis *haunt* me. They follow me around in long lines. I can't as much as look toward the oncoming traffic without one of them stopping. I'm hovered over by crowds of waiters. Shopkeepers open closed stores at my approach. Every elevator flings itself wide as soon as I enter a building and waits for me stolidly at whatever floor I'm at. At every conceivable business office I am instantly waved through the reception area by grinning hordes of receptionists. Minor functionaries at every level of govern­ment exist only to —”

By then I had caught my breath. “But Mordecai,” I said, “this is splendid good fortune. The laws of probability —”

What he suggested I do to the laws of probability was entirely impossible, of course, since they are abstractions without corpo­real parts.

“But Mordecai,” I expostulated, “all this goes to increase your writing time.”

“It does *not,”* said Mordecai forcefully. “I can't write at all.”

“Why not, for heaven's sake?”

“Because I have lost *thinking* time.”

“You have lost *what?”* I asked faintly.

“All this waiting I have had to do — on lines, on street corners, in outer offices — was when I *thought,* when I figured out what I was going to write. It was my all-important preparation time.”

“I didn't know that.”

“I didn't either, but I know it *now.”*

I said, “I thought you spent ail such waiting time fuming and swearing and eating your heart out”

“*Part* of the time was spent that way. The rest of the time I spent thinking. And even the time that I spent railing at the injustice of the universe was useful, for it revved me up and set all my hormones frothing through my bloodstream so that when I *did* reach my typewriter I let all my frustrations boil off in one great and forceful banging at its keys. My thinking supplied my intellectual motivation and my anger supplied my emotional mo­tivation. Together they resulted in huge blocks of excellent writ­ing pouring out of the dark and infernal fires of my soul. *Now* what have I got? Watch!”

He clicked thumb and middle finger softly and at once a gor­geously unapparelled damsel was within hand reach, saying, “May I serve you, sir?”

Of course she could, but Mordecai merely ordered disconso­late drinks for the two of us.

“I thought,” he said, “it was merely a matter of getting ad­justed to the new situation, but I know now that no adjustment is possible.”

“You can refuse to take advantage of the situation as it is offered to you.”

“Can I? You saw me this morning. If I refuse a taxi, it just means another comes. I can refuse fifty times and there'll be one waiting on the fifty-first occasion. They wear me out.”

“Well, then, why can't you simply reserve an hour or two every day for thinking time in the comfort of your office?”

“Exactly! In the comfort of my office! I can only think well when I am shifting from foot to foot on a street corner, or sitting on a granite chair in a drafty waiting room, or hungering in an unserviced dining room. I need the impetus of outrage.”

“But are you not outraged now?”

“It's not the same thing. One can be outraged at injustice, but how can one be outraged at everyone's being too kind and thoughtful to you — the insensitive louts? I am *not* outraged now; I am merely sad, and I can't write at all when I am sad.”

We sat through the most unhappy Happy Hour I have ever encountered.

“I swear to you, George,” said Mordecai, “I think I have been cursed. I think that some fairy godmother, furious at having not been invited to my christening, has finally found the one thing worse than being forced into unwanted delay at every turn. She has found the curse of total subservience to one's wishes.”

At the sight of his misery, a not-unmanly tear rose to my eye at the thought that I was myself none other than the fairy god­mother he referred to, and that somehow he might find this out. After all, if he did, he might in his despair kill himself, or, far worse, me.

Then came the ultimate horror. Having called for the bill and, of course, receiving it at once, he studied it with lackluster eye, tossed it to me and said, with a hollow, hacking laugh, “Here, you pay for it. *I'm* going home.”

I paid. What choice had I? But it left a wound I still feel on damp days. After all, is it right that I had shortened the lifetime of the sun by two and a half million years just so that I would have to pay for drinks? Is that justice?

I never saw Mordecai again. I heard, eventually, that he had left the country and had become a beachcomber somewhere in the South Seas.

I don't know exactly what a beachcomber does, but I suspect they don't get wealthy at it. However, I am quite sure that if he is on the beach and should want a wave, a wave would come at once.

By now, our bill have been brought by a sneering flunky and it lay between us while George ignored it with the flare he usually brings to such a performance.

I said, “You're not thinking of having Azazel do anything for me, George, are you?”

“Not really,” said George. “Unfortunately, old fellow, you are not the kind of person whom one thinks of in connection with good deeds.”

“Then you'll do nothing for me?”

“Not a thing.”

“Good,” I said. “Then I'll pay the check.”

“It's the least you can do,” said George.