

15 MINUTES
BEFORE THE
11TH HOUR



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Fifteen Minutes Before the Eleventh Hour

Do you see that man sitting in the corner booth? Yes, the little balding, rabbit like man in the ill fitting suit, whose watery eyes are constantly twitching behind those horn-rimmed glasses. His name is Jason Trotter and in fifteen minutes he will cross his own personal Rubicon, two minutes after that he will be dead. However if I choose to intervene he will live -- if I choose to.

But why should I? I've never met the man nor spoken to him, in fact three days ago I had no idea he even existed. Of course that changed the moment the vision hit me as I was making breakfast, the crippling migraine followed by hazy, fragmented black and white images: this diner; Jason holding a gun to a young mans head; a young cop, coming in for his lunch, drawing his sidearm; garbled words; three shots fired; Jason dying on the floor a surprised look on his face as his red lifeblood, the only colour in the vision, stained the floor. I came to, sweating and shivering in a puddle of my own vomit. My delicious French breakfast was unceremoniously scattered across the floor by my convulsions while burning in my brain was Jason's face, this place, his name, a time and the words I needed to save his life.

Twelve minutes left.

Now I know just about everything there is to know about Jason Trotter, his life unfolded in my dreams as I made my way from New York to this backwater town in Illinois and its rundown little diner. I'll give them this much though, their scrambled eggs are good, still I can't imagine anyone would want to spend the last minutes of their life here.

I wonder if Jason is thinking the same thing, look at him. He's barely touched his food, aimlessly prodding it with his fork while trying to work up the courage to do what he came here for. Jason doesn't think he's going to die of course: he has someone else in mind for that onerous chore.

Eleven minutes to go.

So who is Jason Trotter then? The simple answer is an unremarkable little man. Born forty-three years ago to ordinary parents he's lived an ordinary inconsequential life. He graduated from high school with average grades; he went to a midlist college; he married his highschool sweetheart and they had one ordinary child, who is currently attending college himself. For the past 20 odd years since graduating he has worked at the same bank, been promoted twice and none of his colleagues has a bad word to say about him. Of course they don't really have a nice word to say about him either. He is in short the perfect average Joe. Neither good nor evil, he is simply another face in the crowd going along with the flow.

Of course that changed this morning when he realised his wife was having an affair.

Now he's sitting in that corner booth, plotting to murder the man who cuckolded him. Notice how his left hand is clutching his briefcase handle so tightly that his knuckles are white? You would think he had the Crown Jewels of England inside it or the most classified of documents the way he's holding that handle and you'd be wrong. Inside that case is some inconsequential work related papers and a loaded revolver. A snub nose .38 calibre Smith & Wesson he bought 20 years ago during a spate of local burglaries to protect his family. It's never been fired and despite his intentions it won't be fired today whether or not I intervene.

Nine minutes left now.

I call the waiter over to refill my coffee and request the cheque. He's a gangly young man, all legs and arms, tanned brown from working outdoors in this scorching summer heat with a tousled mop of black hair. He flashes me a warm, pearly toothed smile as he asks me if I enjoyed my meal and I find myself noticing his sparkling blue irises flecked with grey as I tell him the scrambled eggs were lovely. Not many women (and no few men) would fail to feel their heart beat faster at a smile and eyes like that. Least of all Patricia Trotter, Jason's wife.

Yes, our young waiter, Vito according to his name badge, is the lovely Mrs Trotter's lover. It's a timeless story repeated all across the world, a bored housewife neglected by her workaholic husband. She feels alone, a little unloved and sexually frustrated in a house that's felt so empty since her children have flown the nest. Is it any wonder she notices the appreciative glances of the young man she pays to sow the garden, the teasing flirty banter goes from innocent to deadly serious without either really noticing and then almost inevitably they begin sleeping with each other.

As for Vito, he's a young man getting ready to go to college himself. Of course he's going to respond to the advances of an attractive older woman with the typical thoughtlessness of youth. There's nothing malicious in this, neither of them wants to hurt Jason. Patricia still loves him: she just needs the spice and thrill of this illicit affair to feel alive again. As for Vito, he knows and respects that, for him this is just one of many summer dalliances that he'll remember fondly in years to come.

Jason of course feels otherwise, and so here we are with 6 minutes left to save Jason's life.

But why should I? Why does God want me to save this particular man? I ponder this as I reach into my pocket, pull out a silver coin and start to roll it backwards and forwards over my knuckles. It's a very old coin, over two thousand years old to be precise and should probably be in a museum. But I keep it and its brothers with me, a physical reminder of the sin that ultimately brought me here.

I know Jason Trotter now, thanks to my dreams. I know that if I save him here he will go on living his dull little life with no real changes and will die having made the world neither a better nor worse place. What raises him above all the hundreds if not thousands of people who die every day of unnatural causes all around the world?

In the paper today I read of a young child mown down in a drive by shooting gone wrong, he could have grown up to become a doctor, a politician or any of a thousand professions making people's lives better. The other week in Uganda a local politician was assassinated in the middle of his crusade to expose political corruption. Before I left the motel I saw on the News that a Nobel Prize winning physicist was killed in a hit and run accident, who knows what insights into the universe he might have provided if he had lived. Why didn't God send me to save one of them instead of this sad little man?

Three minutes, it's now or never.

I slip a twenty under my plate with the cheque and a tip for Vito: a piece of paper with "Don't screw other men's wives" written on it. It's a good tip. As I get up out of the corner of my eye I can see him flirting with the pretty girl sitting at the counter. So can Jason.

It's the last straw for him, before now he was uncertain but now seeing Vito apparently trampling over the feelings of his wife like that is too much for him. It's written in the sudden grim look on his

face. *How dare he, how dare he flirt with her when he has my wife!* Such a silly sentiment but then humanity has never been the most logical of species.

As I come up to his booth on the way to the door I can see Jason's shoulders tighten with determination. His right hand is fiddling with the clasps on his briefcase, while his left begins to rise to call Vito over. Just a few more steps and I'll be gone, out the door and Jason will be left to his fate. I don't know him, I don't care for him. What is it to me if he or anyone in this little diner lives or dies?

Then a piece of scripture floats to the front of my head, quoted by a warm smooth voice in the original Aramaic, Matthew 25:45: Then shall he answer them, saying, Truly I say to you, Inasmuch as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me. At the same time the smell of those tasty eggs hits my nose and with a sigh I make my decision.

I lean down into the booth, and place my hand on Jason's shoulder. I can feel him flinching in shock as his face looks up to me the sweat glistening in his brow. "Your wife still loves you, she has always loved you. Don't make a stupid mistake, go to her now." I say to him in a low voice.

His face cycles through guilt, fear, and finally relief when I release his shoulder and make my way out the diner. As I cross the parking lot I can see the patrol car pulling up, the young cop from the vision climbing out. I sit in my own car for a minute or two. There are no gunshots, all is well.

I start the engine and begin my journey home to New York. In saving this unremarkable little man in this unremarkable little town have I learned whatever lesson it was Heaven aimed to teach me? No, I don't think I have. I'm not even sure why I saved him. It might have been for that scrap of scripture and the memories it held or hell, it could have been because a diner that makes eggs that good doesn't deserve to have a shooting.

As the strains of Mozart filter out from the radio the only thing I know for sure is that my penance is not over. I can feel the years stretching out before me, the lives I will affect as I struggle towards redemption and the moment when I will finally be able to beg the forgiveness of the one I betrayed.