



The 1st 2nd by Matthew Goodwin

"You're early..."

The bell rang - a third man made his way to the counter, stuffed his hat in his pocket, and nodded at the others.

"And you're late."

"Who's this?" said Late.

"I'm Early."

"I wasn't expecting you till after six... That alarm's got a mind of its own."

"Alarm?" said Early to Late.

Late slipped behind the counter, took in the clock on the wall, and began to tinker with the till. "Don't look at me - ask Mr Five-thirty-on-the-dot over there..."

Five-thirty-on-the-dot cast an inquisitive eye over the man in the pinstripe jacket - the straw-boater on his head, the satchel on his shoulder, the chain of the fob watch hanging from his pocket.

"You're not here to fix the alarm?"

"No," said Early.

"You had that look about you," said Five-thirty-on-the-dot. "A man that knows how to fix things."

"I have a feeling that you might be waiting a while..." Early fished out his fob watch, and studied it. "Have you noticed anything strange about the time?"

"I'd swear my watch is running fast," said Late, "only..." He hesitated, trailed off. "You here to post a parcel?"

Early ignored him. "Was there something else. Something not-quite-right?"

"What exactly *are* you here for?" said Five-thirty-on-the-dot.

"It's going to sound odd," said Late. "But I'd swear *everything* was fast. The way the sun kept climbing. Even the cat next door. Is that your bike outside?"

Early nodded. "The tandem."

"It's a funny thing," said Late, "but when I crossed the bridge - and I'm sure you know what I mean by the roar-of-the-river - the sound...it was wrong. You'd think it was sped-up somehow. Like it was on fast-forward..."

"It reminds me... Of football at school - when it landed on the roof tiles, and for just a second, you didn't know, if it would roll back down towards us - bump over the gutter and come back - or else, whether it would crest the horizon, make it over the ridge - and be lost forever on the flat bits. Sometimes - as it teetered on the brink - my heart flew into my mouth - and time stood still. I can still remember the throb of blood inside my brain - as if I had forever to try and fix the problem. But of course, I never did - I could only stand frozen and watch... Just before the holidays, the handyman used to take a ladder to the top - and throw all the balls back. A right free-for-all..."

"This was like that - time, I mean - only, the other-way-around. Time didn't feel longer - not stretched so slow it was almost standing still. No - this is the opposite. Getting faster - gaining momentum. That's why I'm late."

"My God," said Five-thirty-on-the-dot, "now I really *have* heard it all. Ever since that day - when you fell in the pond..." He turned to Early. "Away with the fairies..."

"You've noticed nothing yourself?" said Early. "Nothing at all?"

Five-thirty-on-the-dot shrugged. "I feel a bit... A bit sleepy."

"Like the night flew by," said Late.

Early opened the door to the post-office - the bell rang. "There's a thing or two you ought to know - come on, let's go for a ride."

Five-thirty-on-the-dot put a hand to his mouth and coughed. "Are you forgetting something - you're already Late as it is?"

"There'll be no one here till seven and you know it," said Late.

"It's a small village," said Five-thirty-on-the-dot. "But the day you let your guard down -"

"It's important," said Early, "and it'll only take a minute..."

Late followed Early out the door. Early took the tandem by the handlebars, righted it, and sat on the front seat. "Hop on."

The two men began to pedal. "What were you doing by the pond?" said Early.

"I was young," said Late. "And boys will be boys..."

"You jumped."

Every now and then, the tandem shook as it passed over the cobbles of the High Street. The yews in the graveyard stretched their branches and yawned - that old familiar creak of ancient timbers. Fallen leaves began to scatter in the wind.

"Some years ago I lost my watch -" said Early. "It was a Master Copy. The First Second." The ribbon of his hat was flapping in the breeze - the wind was working double time, moving against the tandem. "It must have landed in the village pond - and when you fell in - it took root inside you. Fixed itself to the rhythm of your heartbeat. Look."

The sun was climbing - a few remaining clouds zipped across the sky like tugboats under steam. The tandem sauntered down the lane. Dew lifted from the grass of the front gardens, returning to mist beneath the sunbeams, lifting off the surface of the earth - a weight from its shoulders. "It's all going too fast," said Late.

"He's made it to second gear already. Watch out - here come the brakes." The tandem squeaked - Early peered over the edges of the footbridge, took in the flow of the brook beneath. They dismounted, leant the bike on the parapet. Early put one foot on the capstones, waved a hand, and pressed a finger to his lips.

"What is he?" said Late.

"He's the troll beneath the bridge," said Early.

"What does that make us?" said Late.

"He's one of time's creatures - when you go to sleep - the First Second goes back to its own rhythms. A kind of auto-pilot. That's when he snatched it -"

"Why doesn't the watch match the time? You said it's the Master?"

"Exactly - so it's the other way around. Time speeds up to match the watch." Early sighed. "It's not actually time that's changing - it's our heartbeats. When we're working quicker - thinking, moving, feeling - when even our blood is pumping quicker - then we can get a lot more done. The seconds get longer."

Early stood on the low wall of the bridge, wobbled for a split second, windmilled his arms, and looked back. "Now - it's going the other way - slowing our hearts - making the seconds fly by. That's why they chose me for this mission - I wasn't born here, but I'm as human as you are... Otherwise I'd be at odds with the whole thing. He's clearly no expert with these things. He can only move in steps - gears is the best word I have."

"You might want to look before you leap."

"No time for that," said Early.

Late took him by the wrist. "What if we fail?"

"It's the end of time," said Early. Birds were carving circles in the sky, moving too fast. Late could hear the honk of geese, see the V of the flock - God's spitfire.

"I'll see you down there."

"What exactly am I supposed to do?" said Late. He sat on the parapet, shifted his legs over the edge, and examined the ground beneath. The river was two arches away - narrow in the summer.

"I know you didn't know it, but for years the First Second has been living in you," said Early. A look - more serious than before, came into Early's eyes. His pupils enlarged. "You have powers."

It was sitting in the lee of the bridge, the river by his feet, safe beneath the archway from the beams of the sun, surrounded by books - holding one open with one hand - a watch in the other - ticking very quickly.

"Now."

It screamed. Late raised a hand - felt something not exactly extend from it - more like a kind of elastic, something passing between him and it.

It lay limp by the fringes of the flowing waters - the watch loose inside Its open hand. Early fished out the book from where it had fallen in the shallows of the brook, shook it a bit, and left it lying where the sun could reach it. He raised his eyebrows. "It's an antique book..."

He opened his satchel, took out a watch - brass fixtures and fittings, the hands frozen. "Here it comes..."

The watch in Its hand stopped - Early's watch began to tick. "Barely an eon..." he said. "Just a kid playing games. He won't try this again. Would you lend me a hand?"

They lifted It up to a sitting position, propped his back against the old stones of the bridge.

"Time's back to normal," said Late. "The shadows - a moment ago they were spinning like mad."

"And all's well that ends well," said Early. "Do you want it back?"

"I was hoping..." Late trailed off.

"No deal I'm afraid," said Early. "Time's a funny thing - but when you lose the First Second - it can't take root a second time."

"Why not?" said Late.

"Just picky - that's all. I never should of lost it in the first place." He smiled. "But that's another story." He took out his fob watch, held it side by side with the First Second. "I don't like to sound ungrateful - but I must be off. You understand?"

"Of course," said Late.

That evening, Late took a walk by the village pond - found it where it must have landed all those years ago. The watch face was broken - several cracks in the glass - the stem of the wind-up was missing, lost forever. Late had it repaired, kept it with him all his life.

And it was a funny-thing, because every now and then, it went wrong - ran too fast when he was tired, and reading a book before bed. Or slowed down when the football was on. Sometimes when he passed a man with a pinstripe blazer, he thought of Early, and wondered if it might be him.

But Late never met him again.