

"TWO MINUTES"

- A short story

My family and friends call me Two Minutes. You read right, Two Minutes. The name stuck since age four, perhaps five. Too young to remember who decided to alter my birth name - Bertrand Bartholomew Jones - or why. Two Minutes from the time I was old enough to ask. "Just 'Two Minutes'" was what Mother would give me; always answering in a nonsensical manner, succinctly. "Two Minutes". No discussion, no explanation. I never protested. Uncle Barth did, mother's brother, Robert Bartholomew, III, an English Lit professor who shared an love for both literature and beer. I was never clear which he loved the most. His dislike was not cloudy – he hated nicknames - particularly mine.

"He should be called by his birth name. His name is not Two Minutes!"

Didn't work, no one listened. Uncle Barth never had a nickname. His name was shortened though. He was Barth. Not Dr. Bartholomew. Not Professor Bartholomew. He never complained about the shortening of his name, instead concentrating on my nickname, to him there was a difference.

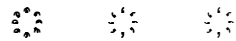
"Why Two Minutes, let's call him Quick Grits," it's just as insulting. ... "How about Quick Oats," ... "Premature, ... Soon, ... Early Bird, ... Over-soon, ... Too-Soon, ... Half-baked, ... Too-Fast, ... Quick-draw, ... Not Yet Done, ... Rapid Rise, ... On Short Notice, ... Short Order, ... Early."

Dispersing nicknames in rapid succession, as if playing a board game, scrabbling, fitting the new name in place of another, moving on to the next; taunting those who insisted on Two Minutes. Everyone ignored him.

“I don’t care what you say Barth, that boy’s name is Two Minutes.”

Venturing too far, giving lectures on “the damage to his ego”, “his sense-of-self”, others who were his age, or older, cursed him in their way – devoid of profanity – somewhat akin to talking to the village idiot. Pitying, not pitying; blessing with words not-at-all intended to bless; dismissing the words, him.

“Damn educated fool. That boy is Two Minutes, from the day he was born; cried for two minutes, ate for two minutes, shitted for two minutes.”



Gripping the edge of the table, emoting spittle, a substance more visible than the nectar trail flowing from thistle to a hummingbird’s beak, the density of disturbed ragweed; liquidity not liquidity. Beer mixed with food stuff; green, brown, lots of yellows. Jolly Green Giant Corn, sprinkled with mixed vegetables and embedded “ha-ha(s)”. The ha-ha(s) trailed, not part of the spittle.

“The same pattern”, well not the same pattern – wrong way of saying it – “the same thing” – no, “thing” isn’t a good way of explaining – “the same behavior” – that’s better, up until his death ... at his death ... spitting, spewing, leaning, gripping, the ha—ha(a); never raising his head, embedded fingers - into the wooded table, wedging and argument against the preordained.

“Silly, silly, silly people what’s the point,” were his last words, while flecking varnish, falling over – dead –stricken for insisting.

PART 1 – A MEASUREMENT OF TIME

Susan actually counted this time, even though she didn't have to. Knowing how long, knowing the count, when they started, when they stopped. Not necessarily a celebration. On their anniversary, marking the day, two years later, since saying their “we do(s)”, “until death do we part” - “I love you”; promising fidelity, binding fates, coupling.

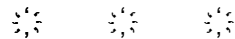
Three times a week, twelve times a month, one hundred and fifty-six times a year, reliably, predictably, calendared; same day, time, count. This time, the last time, time before - foreshadowing not needed - reliably predictive behavior.

Moving away immediately on the last count, into the recesses, always backward, sideward, out of the bed; correcting course, leaning, striking the door frame with his left shoulder, moving inward, while the door closes, slipping into the darkness. Always holding the giggle, up until the time she heard the stump. A little girl's giggle entertained by the faint image; into the doorway (same spot, same arm); disappearing, ghostlike.

A low, happy, giggle done while turning to the left – always to the left - towards the wall, stealing a glance at the clock (the only item Susan kept from her first marriage), at the time the numbers flipped, assuring all was well.

The consistency of life - one hundred and twenty seconds, one hundred and twenty steps - moving from the neighbor's bungalow, crossing the street into their yard, a split level home inherited from Susan's family; depositing the mail; rain, sleet, snow. Not knowing, no way of knowing; he remained secreted in the recesses of the restroom until the letter carrier cleared the street, one hundred and twenty steps later. She turning, giggling - satisfied. Conduct not prescribed by law, not by tradition. Not inscribed in a book, as a recipe.

They both have noticed their pattern, from the first time, the next, the next; watching the pattern repeat. Rising pressures, dilated eyes, mouths, hearts; temporarily blinded, palpated chest walls, failing capillaries compromised by the unbridled excitement. Controlled, losing control, extending, retracting, pushing, pulling – up – down - up - invading, intensifying sense of taste, touch; engulfing, enveloping them. Much like sulfur when pulverized, scattering dust, floating, reacting, followed by the predictable – an explosion - one hundred and twenty seconds later, blessings of the Gods. Assigned angels appeared instantaneously, floating overhead; smiling, giggling, performing assigned tasks. Giggles - intense giggles - starting after the door's closing, the descent, the number flipping. Some entered through the wall, near and over the door's overhead trim; hovering, descending, helping - wiping perspiration - lowering body temperatures, assuring the door remained firmly secured.



Much like other couples, never bothering to engage in *the* conversation, to talk about *it*. Perhaps, too busy, saving the discussion for another day, ignoring the pattern, convincing themselves there was no pattern. This day - that day - they finally talked.

“Are you satisfied?”

“Satisfied with what?”

“You know”, was the response, said while his head moved downward, firmly glued to his chest. Previously thinking too much, never asking, not knowing what Susan thought, how she would answer, if asked. Hoping for the best; repositioning on the bed. Asking exactly two years later, even though he had been moving backward, sideways, upward, since the first time, movements now engrained into his brain matter; tattooed, documented, by the permanent markings on his left arm.

He – him - his - maleness – the prideful one - lion strong – vibrant, a representative of Mother Nature’s gifts; King of the Jungle proud. Possessing no reference, no bearing, other than his maleness, now asking about an unexplainable out-of-body existence, explosive from the beginning, grabbing and casting him into darkness, his repeating the same line – “I’m have to go” – when he didn’t have to go.

His “you know” caused him to revisit being flat-out spent, as he has never been spent before, repeatedly consumed, the conquering of the beast. Sensing the presence of others – ethereal beings - a tickle emanating on the ends of both shoulders – brushed - a light brushing; never hearing a sound, only a feeling; never seeing, anything. A rushing, cooling breeze out of nowhere, chilling his body, instantly. Invitation only occurrences, into the unknown, the surreal, otherworldly; they finally decided to talk.

He was compelled to ask; confused, conflicted, in a sense lost, devoid of understanding as to what was happening. Susan answered the question, “I know what ‘you know’ mean.”

“I am ... satisfied,” stated without pause, accompanied with a wayward smile, the ever present giggle, invisible hands on both of their shoulders.

Once married to a Mr. Long John, who specialized in running marathons, 26.2 miles, 1,660.032 inches, 55,334 steps, each time; making her feel somewhat akin to the exercise machines at Planet Fitness. Pounding, pounding, pounding, pounding, pounding, reset, repeat, pounding, pounding, pounding, pounding. Understanding exactly what he was asking. Looking upward, wayward, watching the televisions situated overhead, followed by more pounding, pounding, pounding, stealing a glance - towards the clock – at the door - counting time, pounding, pounding, pounding, pounding - into his eyes - seeing someone else – not her. Watching him perform magic; touching her without touching her, pounding, pounding,

pounding. Diverting attention, looking around, at those on other machines, pounding, pounding, pounding, dismounting, losing interest even though the membership fees have been paid far in advance. Initially complaining, “You have never made love to me, maybe to someone else, not me.” Long John’s response was much the same, creating the proverbial, meaningless, vulgar word salad, tossing her, pounding, spoiling the salad, ruining it, stopping hours later, admiring his work. The day she walked out, she was heard saying, “I’m not a Croker Sack”. He didn’t understand, “I know babe. I know that!” Not knowing what she meant, not spending time figuring out what she meant; attributing the complaints to the different language spoken by women.

After the first explosion, one hundred and twenty seconds later, seeing what she saw, feeling what she felt. Seeing him hover backward, float sideways, propelled against the door-jammed - a bumbling kind of jamming - seeing opaque hands/wings reach, closing the door. Knowing exactly what he was asking. Seeing images, angels, early on, when they stayed in place too long, giggled too much, catching a glance, not knowing they wanted her to catch a glance. She knew what *you know* meant, flat-out knew.

“But two minutes?”

“You’ve counted.”

“No, no. ... Not really.”

Unexplainably he knew the unit of time, the measurement, the exact measurement. He hadn’t counted; a sixth-sense, repetitive actions ingrained, an idiot savant’s ignorance which allowed him to survive the blessings, the curse. Knowing, not knowing.

Knowing, the same way one knows fear, as the bear pursues. No one has to tell. No one has to instruct, “Run”. No one has to draw a picture – “Bear”. Intuitively obvious, no clue

needed. Expelling a scream never practiced. Curing arthritic feet, escaping to safety, faster, swifter, outside the realm of the possible, surviving, that type of knowledge. Knowing in the way water imparts knowledge; rising, surrounding, consuming, inputting instantaneous reasonable deductions, “doesn’t look good”.

Knowing the count, living the count, over and over again; however, not knowing there was an angel assigned to carry him, through and down, the clumsy one, before the after-life, in the after-life, not yet perfecting the routine, emitting a “oops” every time she bumped him against the trim, the wall, when entering the restroom. He knew how long. Consistently melting from the explosion, experiencing a heat never felt before; a consuming, addicting heat, taking possession of souls, blending him into her, her into him, causing sheer joy, albeit a fearful joy. *Two minutes*, he thought. The question, the thought, babbled him.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m a hundred and twenty seconds sure. Enough time for a world class athlete to run the hundred meters ten times, if the body is able to withstand the repeated, intense exertion. Time enough for Stevie Wonder to sing most of “I’ll Be Loving You Always”. Time enough for me to melt into your arms.”

Susan wanted to say, “Time enough for me to melt into your arms, before you float away.” She didn’t - knowing *the* giggle always accompanied *the* sight. Fearing the giggle would convert to laughter, guffawing laughter, capturing every fiber in her body. So, she didn’t, stopping after saying she melted in his arms. She, “Her Lioness”, understood; using his love of sports, the music of his youth, and simplicity to explain, explaining one hundred and twenty seconds was one hundred and twenty seconds.

“Really ...?”

“Yes, really”!

So, it was, answered firmly, with simplicity. A long delayed conversation, finally occurring. Lasting ... wait, you already know how long the conversation lasted ... don't you?

PART 2 - THERE IS AN END, ALWAYS AN END

A makeup dinner, scheduled three days after last talking, seven days since the last time they were in each other's presence. The trip to Navit's, Zora's favorite restaurant, is twenty minutes at most. Today's trip seemed longer, prolonged, even though the traffic had long abated, magically thinning and dissipating after the first mist, disappearing altogether when the rains persisted. The moon's glare reflected off the wet pavement; illuminating, tracing, tracking the water's movement, flowing upward and outward – over and onto the car's hood, seemingly ending the journey against her windshield. Remaining entrenched in the eastern sky, contributing to the sense of the foreboding, casting tenor and tone to Zora's travel.

Resting her left arm against the arm rest, head against the window, applying pressure against both - preoccupied, not knowing what else to do. The rain worked in conjunction with the moon's glare, appearing to convert to tears, a sad refrain.

Seeing each other for the last five years, possessive of similar personalities, with competing, overwhelming differences; contrasting, drawing in, repelling away. Zora suggested the date, the restaurant; her body language suggested otherwise. Pressing harder, denting her skull, curls, cushioning and protecting; manipulating the steering wheel, scratching, lifting the leather, permanently marring the texture; a left heel dotted the carpet – like a mimic; a misplaced mime - drawing an erratic path across the floorboard. Uncertainty, conflicted thoughts, anxieties on display.

Talking on the phone daily, texting multiple times a day, seeing each other regularly, at least three days a week, alternating between each other's place; the predictable habit. Much like others' spaghetti Wednesday, date night Thursday; setting aside time for each other, cherishing time together, incrementally moving towards affirming to others a promise to love “in sickness

and in health”. Ending each other sentences, telling different parts of the story, on cue, raising index fingers in unison, aye-aye moments, the reasons they loved each other. They love each other – they do – no question, they do – never the question.

Arriving, waiting her turn, pulling up front, navigating around the cones, lowering the window to hand the keys to the valet were the seen acts; denting, digging, dotting remained suppressed, hidden. Quietly counting the number of times this has occurred, knowing the time-outs have now become the rule, no longer the exception.

A problem now more of an obstacle, protruding outward preventing progress. Preventing their relationship from moving forward, working as a retardant, preventing growth; present from the time they met, although obscured, covered with a lifetime of avoidance. Perverse, persistent, now fully exposed, staying for days, sometimes months, driving a wedge, repelling both onto their separate islands. They’ve talked about it, that’s about all,; the problem has remained in place, much like a bothersome pimple unwilling to dissolve, heal, refusing to release its contents, a painful and ugly nuisance; permanently affixed, an impenetrable mess. Part of her knew Zander was right, seeing the wreckage she wrought, days later after separating to their corners of isolation. Never willing to admit fully, always pulling back, unwilling to meet half-way, remaining entrenched on her side of the line.

Handing over the keys, stepping onto the sidewalk, a little late – well twenty minutes late – a little late for Zora. Straightening spine, dress, smile, moving toward the door; flashing the newly placed smile, disabling the doorman, a daily practice, no matter what. Acknowledging the maître d, stating her purpose, looking about the room for Zander, spotting him in the northeast corner with his head down looking at his phone; Zora’s phone buzzed at the same time.

“There ... He’s over there.”

“Yes, Madame, Sandra will escort you to your table.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Never willing to say “I’m sorry”, forever casting aspersions, spreading the blame, changing the subject; disarming with a smile, a well-placed touch. Searching for the emotional exit, reversing directions, assessing the other person’s faults, invariably mouthing, “you too”, “let’s not talk about me”, never, “you might be right”. Screaming followed, prolonged screaming, gut wrenching, soul stripping screaming, attached to the mantle of victimhood, an unfair world.

Outwardly, a controlled walk, displaying confidence, self-assured; inwardly, not at all self-assured; keeping pace with the host, seeing Zander see her. Smiling, moving closer, touching, holding - planting a kiss behind his left ear.

“Sorry, I’m late. Excuse me for a minute. I need to wash my hands.”

“No problem, love.”

Not really a problem, even though his communion with the phone – texting - belied his words:

“How long …?”

“I have been sitting here 15 min. I’ ll wait another 10 min.”

“I thought we were going to talk.”

Answering his text with another text:

“We don’ t need to talk. I just want to see you! Xo xo!!!”

Apologizing for his putting her in the spot, blaming her, repositioning the saddle, placing it on his back instead:

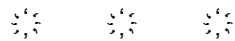
“It is my fault! I love you!”

“I miss you!”

“Are you coming?”

“Please let me know!”

This familiar pattern was Zander, sending another text immediately after sending the last, pressing send, oblivious to faulty Wi-Fi; transmitted randomly, a jumbled, begging mess of texts; a self-imposed trap, begging, pleading for attention. Zora’s phone was buried in place, initially buzzing when she moved onto Washington Heights. Zora received the first and third texts. She never received the fifth, sixth, and eighth texts. Whether she answered, didn’t answer, didn’t matter. She arrived; standing in place, lightly brushing against Zander’s cheek, whispering, escaping to the ladies’ room. She made it – that all that mattered.



Thursdays are normally busy at Navit’s, particularly the dinner hours. This Thursday was no different. Tables 48, 49, 51, 52, 53 and 54 were occupied, with 48, 49, and 52 having circulated three times, Table 52 twice, over the last hour and half. Muted colors, sounds, alluring smells was Zavit’s claim; a layered, interlaced, addictive environment.

Regina and Larry Smyth occupied Table 51, nearing the end of a two hour celebration, celebrating the dismissal of sexual assault of a child charges. Larry a teacher by profession, ten years in middle school as a teacher before promoting to the Assistant Principal position, a position he has occupied for the last three years. Regina is a homemaker. The accusation were brought by Larry’s niece, his oldest brother Robert’s youngest daughter, thirteen at the time of out-crying, out-crying to everyone occupying the three adjoining rooms. Told at a holiday dinner held at Regina and Larry’s, during a game suggested by Larry.

“Something I read”, Larry explained, “Goes like this, the object is to tell a secret, something no one else knows ... surprise everyone.... Keep it light. Might be fun, might be fun.”

“Sounds like fun”, the voice of a teenager said, sitting in the corner, glued to a phone. Might have been Robert’s son, hidden, buried; the sound emitting upward and out, causing others to agree in rapid succession.

“I agree.”

“I got a story.”

“Me, too....”

“Me too...!”

“Can I go first, can I go first!”

“No me!”

The first four or five stories were light hearted. “I didn’t really catch the fish,” kind of stories. Admitting to skipping class 40 years ago story, followed by the confessor’s child admitting, “Well since we are admitting stuff, I sort-of-skipped class before the holiday break.” An admission which lifted eyes, strained necks, possessed hands, feet, vocal cords; releasing laughter, planting feet against the floor, hands against each other. No you didn’t reactions.

Uncle Jimmy came limping from the adjoining room, after he heard the last story; hurried, he too wanting to tell on himself. Jimmy has told the same story for the last thirty years. A story about when he was a young police officer. Bravery, service, the call of duty; this man pulled a gun on me story. This time Jimmy modified the story, following Larry’s instructions to a tee – telling - surprising himself and everyone else.

“He didn’t pull a gun. It was a pickle. A damn pickle! Saw it was a pickle, never thought it was a gun! Lied about the gun thing! I knew it was a pickle ... scared the living shit out of me! I have eaten a pickle since!”

Barely emitting the last words; failing in his attempt to harness his own body and mind, failing pitifully in controlling others; wetting eyes, rolling heads, bodies falling back, forward, onto the floor, screaming. Cedric, a neighbor’s child, stood, dancing in place, turning, turning, turning in place, even though he had never heard the original version of the story; everyone else’s reactions compelled his movement.

“Jimmy!”

“Boy you’ve been lying for the last thirty years, telling the same story over and over again. The stuff about a pickle is a lie, isn’t it,” words spoken by Larry.

Communal laughter, everybody, laughing, begging for the truth, incredulity mixed with shock, not knowing the truth from the lie, lie from the truth. Jimmy’s face didn’t tell, hiding the answer. A painful smile, laughter, tears; mixed together; sitting initially, unable to remain seated, standing, moving over a couple of chairs, sitting again. The unexpected change in the long-worn story surprised even him, silencing him, a silent laugh, cry, demonstratively doing both.

So it was, a light game of “telling secrets”, until the sixth or seventh story. The deviation coming from the Larry’s right, from the other end of the table. Pushing back, standing, not standing, leaning into the space, bending over - telling.

“Uncle Larry touched me wrong, made me have sex with him.” Adding, for good measure, “I’m not the only one!”

Constricted eyes, hands and feet represented the dramatic mood change; planting them in place, vanquishing smiles. The child's nervousness labored words pierced all, floating from room to room, stilling conversations, eliminating the noise from the football game, demanding attention, sapping appetites. She repeated herself, just in case no one heard, "Uncle Larry made me have sex with him! I am not the only one! He has been bothering me since I was 11!"

Larry remained seated, waiting, appearing not to carry a worry in the world, allowing time to push the "oohs" aside, permitting silence to enter, ignoring others' eyes before pushing upward, curving his back, securing himself with the chair; lifting, standing, walking to the other end of the room, followed by the eyes of the living, dead, in order to face his accuser. Face her he did, moving twenty feet to the other end of the table, reaching over and down, placing both hands on her shoulders, caressing them.

Shaking, crying saying much the same, not calmed by Larry's touching, refusing to remain quiet, repeating, repeating, - repeating - for the third time, just in case no one heard. "It's true, he molested me, its' true..."

First there was an, "It is okay," followed by "hushing", wrapping the child's mouth, eyes, face with towels, removing her from the room, as if she had been stricken by an out-of-control fever. Removing her, placing her in a tub of cold water, wrapping her body, "hushing her," praying over her, never saying a word about her words. She had no fever though.

The family prayed, together. Praying over the unexpected family crisis, asking for God's invention, Wilfred wondered out loud, "Who called the police?" Moving the child to the third bedroom, isolating her, questioning the others ("I wasn't the only one"), receiving "I don't know", "not me." Three replied, "I just want to forget." Words never said to the police, never repeated; never happened.

“How was the rest of your day?”

“Um ... what did you say?”

“How was the rest of your day?”

“Oh my day, a good day, a burden lifted. God listened to our prayers.”

Words said at Regina, not to her, looking around, his attention on Zora, who was in the process of excusing herself, walking bristly towards the ladies' room; ankles, butt, head, whole body fixated.

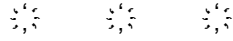
“What are you looking at...?”

“Nothing”, the same nothing he spouted after story time. Telling Regina nothing happened, begging her to believe him. Barely moving an eye, nary a tic, showing no emotions, firm, resolute. “Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing happened. I swear on my mother's grave, nothing happened! Do you honestly believe I would go over comfort her, touch her shoulders to calm her, if something happened? Do you remember? Nothing happened.”

Larry's “nothing” this day, for some reason caused Regina to remember other words on the subject. Calling the child a “winch”, “a little winch”, while swearing on Mrs. Geneviève's grave. Today she saw Mrs. Genevieve's face, heard her words, questioning her, out of Larry's presence, prior to their marriage.

“Why are you marrying him?”

Perplexed why she was asking; wondering why Mrs. Geneviève ended the conversation the way she did. “Be careful baby, be careful.” Sitting at an angle, acknowledging “nothing” with nothing, save slightly turning; a slighter nod, seeing the sightline, tracking to the end of the line, seeing what he was seeing. She also saw something else - the light - God didn't answer her prayers.



Zora's anxieties were no longer on display, corrected incrementally, during the walk from the sidewalk to the maître d, walking to the table, when entering the stall; sitting, checking her phone, reading Zander's texts, stiffening her spine, her resolve; intentionally, unintentionally resorting to type.

"How was your drive?"

"It was good."

"What have you been being doing this week?"

"Not much."

"Why so quiet?"

Quiet because the texts convinced Zora there wasn't a need to talk about what they had come to talk about, no need to talk at all, not at all, no need to accept blame. A familiar path, a predictable path: "Who were texting?" "Your head remained down the entire time, ignoring me." "You didn't see me coming in." "What if I didn't see you and had to turn around and leave?" "Why didn't you tell the maître d, my name, so that they expected me? They didn't know who I was." "Are you ashamed of me?" "You never answer my first question, 'who were you talking to?'" "What is her name!?" In less than thirty seconds (actually 28.9 seconds) from the time she sat, to the last word, casting eight, nine, ten questions, never waiting on an answer to any of them. Accompanied by tears, a controlled terror intended for him alone, lifting the hairs on his neck and arms.

Removing her hand from Zander's hands, pulling back, crossing her legs, flicking the left index finger and thumb in the same manner she flicks the ashes from cigarettes. On this occasion the cigarette was imaginary; the path taken and intent was not. "You haven't answered

any of my questions?” “Who were you talking to?” Refusing to come up for air, not allowing time to pause, not allowing Zander to answer.

Zander attempted to intercede, protesting, pleading, “I wasn’t on the phone. I was texting you.” His answering didn’t mean the attacks stopped. It didn’t, she didn’t; forty four seconds in, now in total control.

“So you were texting the entire time you were sitting here?” “You’ve talked to no one?” “Who is she?” Pushing back from the table, now physically shaking, physical behavior complimenting the emotional spillage of word, normal behavior, the reason why they were meeting. Tables 48, 51, 52, 53 should have, might as well, grabbed chairs and join the conversation, listening, even if they didn’t want to listen. Zora was in total control, a tone which permitted others’ involvement, ceasing conversations, causing others to talk with muted breaths, restrained chewing, careful not to disturb her, the gentle placement of the silverware back in their plates. Larry was all in; refusing to cast his eyes aside, examining every portion of Zora’s body - wrists, waist, weight, counting the number of hairs on her arms, admiring her calves, cheeks; blushing when she blushed, crying when she cried. No longer pretending he was looking at nothing, complimenting her dress, looking at and under her clothes.

“Who is she?” “Who is she!?” Akin to a cornered feline, Zora continued to strike, cat-quick, persistent, stalking. There being another “she” was not really her concern. The words worked as cover for the doubts, anxieties and fears which burdened her minutes before. She grabbed ahold of Zander’s Achilles (his love for) and took advantage. Zander’s eyes moved from Zora’s eyes to the table; counting threads in the table cloth, examining the bread, no longer hungry, no longer interested in talking. Redirecting, counting the bubbles circulating upward in

the glass, watching Zora's hand move across the table, reaching, breaking the bond his hands had formed.

“Let me have your phone!”

Sixty three seconds in – grabbing, securing, turning at an angle, waiting for Zander to demand the phone back – He didn't. His head affixed – down - not looking, not protesting, not responding, muted by what was occurring, again. Trying to remember why they had taken a time out, remembering, seeing the same pattern play out before him, after *she had promised to never travel the same path again*. He counted fifty-eight bubbles. Carrying less about the damn phone, moving away from the table, not hearing a word, or another question, “Whose number is this?”... “You did make a call!”

Even though Zora recognized the number as her other number ... that wasn't the point. The point followed, “You lied about not calling anyone!”

“Who is she!?” “Who is she!?” “You don't love me!”

Expecting an answer, not hearing an answer, never looking up or around, not realizing Zander moved away from the table and was half-way out the door at the time the plea for love was made. One hundred and twenty seconds from the time Zander posed the first question, “How was your day?” Packed around one hundred and ten seconds of clarity; propelling Zander out of his seat, towards the exit, moving around eyes, tables, mouths agape, out the door, onto the street.

“You don't love me!”

“Madam, do you wish to order? Is the gentleman coming back?”

Everyone else knew the answer to the second question. Not until the question did Zora notice Zander's table napkin; neatly folded, appearing to be fresh. His chair was in-place, tucked

neatly under the table. The waiter was standing within inches, appearing magically in her mind, holding Zander's old napkin in his right hand. The collective eyes of Tables 48, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, answered the question for her; answering to themselves, some acting as if they were participants in a game show, shouting out the answer, "No he ain't. He ain't coming back."

"He will be back."

"Yes madam."

She was wrong. He never came back.

PART 3 - How great thou art!

Not knowing the guest of honor, never attending a service at Emmanuel Temple, unfamiliar with the south side – none represented impediments. Moving down the aisle, seeing the casket, becoming familiar with the unfamiliar, stopping thirteen rows up, four seats in, nodding at an unfamiliar face; the usual, commonplace - her practice. Dapping at a tear, then a second, a third, an unfamiliar practice, crying fully by the time she was fully seated. Crying not because she was sad, far from it, she didn't know the decedent, none of his family members, no one at Emmanuel Temple; even though the unfamiliar face she exchanged nods with might have been someone she has known before. “How Great Thou Art” does it every time to her, causing tears to cascade over and down.



“How Great Thou Art.”

The twenty-fifth funeral attended in thirty days, settling among strangers; normally, never shedding a tear, never. Attending to observe, an obsessive observer, attending funerals, even for those she did not know; now knowing traditions, patterns across faiths, settling amongst the faithful, disappearing at services' end. Seeing the story in the newspaper first, then online, “a murder at John Jay High.” The police believed the person of interest may be a former student, someone the Principal knew. She asked to see him, waited at least thirty minutes for him to arrive, “was comfortable, not at all rushed; speaking to him, when he returned to the office, after he spoke to her.”

Channel 5 interviewed the Admission Attendant; standing in front of the school, at an angle, allowing the audience to see the Principal's body being lifted into the ambulance. The Attendant dapped – her eyes – while straightening her blouse, hair, skirt; looking over her left shoulder toward the ambulance, turning back to the camera, saying, “He looked surprised, hurried her into his office. Before closing the door I heard him say, ‘What do I owe this visit to. Clearly they knew each other.’” Without a question every being asked, she continued, “She seemed so polite, so reserved.”

“I’m shocked,” said at the same time the ambulance moved away, turning slowly into the street, as if tell the viewing audience, “you know he’s dead, don’t you.” Stabbed in his neck, chest, and groin, dead before anyone ever entered the room, before the delayed call was made for help, long dead by the time he was placed in the back of the ambulance.

“He always told us never to disturb him. We thought he was in his office working.” Stated in a matter of fact manner, looking away from the camera, moving both hands up and down, anticipating the next question, explaining, “I don’t know how long, maybe thirty minutes, before we decided to check.”

The time was actually an hour and half. Mrs. Tricia decided to check. She had been at John Jay longer than anyone else and needed to use the Principal’s restroom. She didn’t like using the employees’ restroom. She found his body. The Attendant didn’t tell Channel 5 this information, because she didn’t know. Present when “she came in”, leaving after “she went in”, looking “at her” as she moved toward the Principal’s office, by her desk, consumed by jealousy, never seeing her face, but her hips, the flowered patterned dress, the sway in her walk, feline movement, consumed by mistrust – for both of them – causing her to take a break, a prolonged break. She didn’t tell Channel 5 or anyone else the whole truth.

Maybe she was still adjusting to Larry telling her he loved her the night before, saying she had the same name as his mother, promising to tell his wife “soon” of his love for her. None of it was true. His wife didn’t care who he loved. The attendant’s name was Nancy; his mother’s name was not, not even close. Larry loved only himself. Nancy didn’t need to tell the whole and entire truth to compel Solace’s attendance. The newspaper article was enough. The story was printed at the top of the fold, continued over to Page 15(A), taking another two column inches. “She couldn’t have been in there no longer than ten minutes. She spoke when she walked out of the office - attractive woman, polite - signed out and wished everyone a good day,” words attributed to Mrs. Tricia, even though Mrs. Tricia never saw her walk in, did see her walk out, never looked at her, seeing only her hands, distracted because she needed to use it, concentrating instead on her bladder, patting, holding it in, waiting.

“She was polite, an attractive woman.” These facts were related to Mrs. Tricia after she discovered Mr. Smyth’s body, slumped over the desk, a bloody mess. The discovery propelled a scream from lives past, causing Mrs. Tricia to forget why she entered the room. Pushing her up and over, onto to couch – frightened, frantic - as if she had seen ten rats, her greatest fear, jumping, jumping - jumping in place. “That fool is dead.” Words Mrs. Tricia didn’t tell the paper. Words never spoken online, on television, anywhere else; secreted, sealed at the same time the doors of the ambulance were sealed, carrying away the bloody corpse.

Solace’s attending funerals was a perverse curiosity; not to pay honor, not to mingle, never attending the repast. The tears prevented her from seeing the unfamiliar face attempting to place Solace, sitting across the aisle, on the other side of the church, in a tightly fitted designer dress. Freshly showered, cocoa-butter imbued, applied liberally to both shoulders, glistening. Solace saw none of this, remaining out-of-character, grieving for someone she didn’t know.

On aisles three and four sat the staff from John Jay. Mrs. Tricia sat at the end of the aisle, in order to turn and look. Having read more than one novel where the killer came to the funeral – or was it from a television show? Or was it a movie? Mattered not, she knew, just knew, the killer would show up, sitting, turning, attempting to see everyone’s face, drawing attention to herself from law enforcement, located in the balcony. They obviously read the same novel, crime story, same movie.

Nancy – the attendant – head remained bowed, confessing her love, hearing Larry’s words over and over again, even after Mrs. Tricia took time to have a frank conversation about his supposed love. Mrs. Tricia shouldn’t have bothered; Nancy’s words was all an act, serving a purpose, directing attention her way, caring little about Larry, misstating their last conversation on purpose. He never said he loved her. She called him a whore, slapped him so hard, he wished he was dead. She left him massaging his face. The medical examiner saw the bruise, attributed it to his hitting his head on the desk, ignoring the five elongated fingers telling a different story, a different truth. Sitting adjacent to Mrs. Tricia, two rows behind all of Larry’s nieces, Nancy kept her head bowed, wishing she had been brave enough to stab him.

“He touched me too.”

“I know.”

Reaching over, linking hands, forming a human chain, expressing sorrow for their loss, not Larry’s loss, their loss.

“I am sorry too. He touched me too. I am sorry I didn’t support you.”

Then sings my soul, my savior God, to thee:



How great thou art! How great thou art!

Seven nieces, grown woman now, six remained silent, moved out of the room, pretended they didn't hear what Bethame Ann said, when interviewed, denying he ever touched them. "I love Uncle Larry" - "Not Uncle Larry," refusing to answer any questions, secreting away, directing anger at Bethame Ann, pushing her further away – inward, to other parts of the country - isolating her, themselves. Moving as far as her funds could take her, accompanied by one confidant, alcohol. Challenging their refusal to tell the truth (once) - "You told me; I didn't make this up" – no longer. Never trusting again, losing respect, in others, in herself, her body. Sitting in the church out of respect, sort-of, kind-of, saying before attending, "It was so long ago, nothing really happened, it was as much my fault, a good uncle, wasn't he?" A nonsensical answer, containing contradictory words – admitting not admitting - surreal in a surreal kind-of-way, haunting words, told to a significant other. He didn't understand.

Admittedly, she has never understood her world, trapped by the contradictions, the lies. Knowing what happened, not knowing what happened. Pushing the significant other away before travelling to pay her respects, as she had done others; retracing, repeating her history. Leaving school early (tenth grade), moving thousands of miles away, fleeing from the past, her family, seeking comfort elsewhere; secreting feelings, pretending she didn't care, confiding to sixteen, thirty-two, if necessary, six-ounces, her companions, her confidants. Sitting in Emmanuel Temple, forty-five feet from the Uncle Larry's body, hating the song being sung by

Bertrand, not believing a word, wondering how long the funeral would last (not knowing that “not long” was the answer) wishing for a drink, wanting to be elsewhere.

Bertrand Bartholomew Jones sung for two minutes, stopping flat, straight up at two minutes. Cutting off 1:34, if Alan Jackson had appeared and sung; lopping off 2:53, if Carrie Underwood and crossed the railroad tracks and entered Emmanuel Temple; eviscerating 1:09, if Elvis had resurrected in the middle of the church and sung his version. Sounding like Sam Cooke, moving like Otis Redding, giving no indication he would be done in two minutes, two minutes of glorious gospel. Only two people in the church knew – Regina, the decedent’s wife, and Bertrand’s aunt. She knew the family secrets, knowing why no one called him Bertrand. Smiling, patting both feet, looking askance at the clock on the wall, plenty satisfied when Bertrand stopped singing, flat out stopped, cold as the marble gracing the windows’ sills. Susan, his love, knew, loving her Two Minutes the same as she loved him from day one.

The opportunity was accorded for others to speak, with a two minute limit, no one stood. Not a soul. Not his wife. Not his children. Not the nieces. No one moved, glued to their seats, quiet as the church mice secreted under the choir’s stand. Rows three and four looked to each other, thirty of them, quiet as the muted pigeons above, looking downward, refusing to coo. Quiet – quiet.

The Assistant Principal turned on cue, looking at co-workers, before tracking her eyes across the aisle. She saw the freshly showered, cocoa butter imbued, sublime one, sitting on the other side of the church. “She looks like the woman who exited Larry’s office,” said to herself, under her breath.

“She calmly signed out, that’s her...”

Stealing another glance, a slight glance; readjusting her position, turning away physically, remaining in place mentally, as if the still image was burned onto her pupils. The same image she saw on the video she pulled from now inoperable recorder, then discarding the tape. Filling out an equipment malfunction report - Form Z-2100 – backdating the request, in order to start the process, and have the equipment checked. Telling the investigators, “I was not in the office on the day of the murder.” She wasn’t – in the office - she told the truth; telling them what she wanted them to hear. Never telling everything she saw, everything she did. Looking upward, closing both eyes, appearing to pray, instead assuring herself she was mistaken, “not the same person”, lowering her head, reassured, doubtful, at the same time; she didn’t see what her eyes saw.

The quickest eulogy in the history of the Black church, thanking the Lord, praying for supplementation, an intervening hand; Regina rising, moving to the middle of the church to give instructions for the burial (none), the repast (after the service), “Please stay and celebrate Larry’s home going.” Each segment done in exact two minute increments... but you knew that didn’t you.

How great thou art! Indeed, how great thou art!