Ten Minutes To Five

By Richard Scorza

Two years to the day, the monitor flatlined. Glass under his palm. Nurses in gowns drifting like ghosts. Tubes, plastic, her mouth hidden by the mask. Her last breath heaving her upward, as if the body had to rise to let go.

He opens his eyes to snow.

The 13th-floor window rattles in the wind; his ankles sting from the cold. Cars below lay half-buried, the streets dragged in white. Somewhere, church bells. He holds the mug without tasting it.

Behind him: the kitchen table.

On it: the gun.

Beside it: the folded note.

The forced air kicks on. A low hum. Then the other sound comes back, louder:

Barking impact wrenches.

Rivet guns, ka-chunk, ka-chunk.

Compressed air in sharp bursts.

Back then the noise was the point. The line alive under his watch, eight hundred people riding it like a promise—mortgages and groceries, orthodontia, gas. They called him Doc because he listened for trouble and heard it before it seized. Bearings, belts, anything metal that had decided it was done. “Doc,” they’d say, nodding when he passed.

At home, she’d pick the grit out of his hair and smile like he’d done something holy.

In 2011, they killed the line.

Lights off. Steel cooling. Men in a parking lot promising union brothers forever. By spring they were numbers on each other’s phones that didn’t ring.

He tips the mug. Empty. His hand shakes when he sets it down. Whiskey into the coffee. Or just whiskey.

O'Gara's was across from the plant—narrow, sticky, the kind of dark that didn't care what time it was. For a while it held them: the laid-off, the retired-too-early, the ones who said they'd land on their feet and never quite did. Faces thinning in neon.

He ran into one of the men the plant left behind, Bill Tennyson, at Home Depot, bent over a cart of lumber.

"How you doin' there, Doc?"

"Good, Bill. You?"

"Wife's got me building a deck. Keeps me out of trouble."

Frances nodded. "Yeah, I hear you."

Bill scratched his cheek, half smiled. "Tell Margarete I miss her coffee cake."

Nothing to work on at home. Nowhere to put his hands. So nights out came easier.

One of those nights, Margarete sent Morris—fifteen—to get him. The boy found his father in a booth: warm beer, a woman laughing too loud, too close; her hand on his arm, Frances leaning in. Morris stood in the doorway long enough to understand. He turned away.

Walking home, shame settled between them, soft as dust, hard as stone.

"Frances, honey, layoffs happen. Five more years and you get your full benefits. Remember?"

"Who the hell is going to hire me?"

"We'll find something."

They did. Newgate School. Donated cars in various states of despair, students in coveralls leaning over open hoods. Single moms who got the keys when the engines finally held. He found a kind of worth in that. Different noise. Softer.

The ache of failure didn't leave. It just learned where to sit.

Evenings, when they were good, were a couch and an old movie and her stockinged feet tucked under her. The Twins game, some other silliness, sometimes the television sound turned

down, the room filled with whatever she was saying instead. She'd talk through the credits, whispering about directors, bit players, everyone who'd passed through the frame.

"What was that last thing? Scorsese who?" he'd say.

She'd tilt her head, smile, lay a light hand on his knee.

She'd whisper *I love you* on her way into sleep, words slipping loose as her mouth went soft, TV light washing her face. He'd lie beside her, his breath settling into hers. This was the best of it—a life well lived.

They had plans. A map in the kitchen drawer with circles on it: the Grand Canyon, diners off the interstate, the sorts of motels where the ice machine never works. They were going to follow the circles until they'd had their fill.

Then the world closed.

When it opened, she was gone.

After that, nothing held shape.

He wakes before dawn, stands in the kitchen without knowing why, leaves the TV on all day. The city moves through his window like water he's not allowed to touch.

Once a week he rides the elevator to the lobby. The concierge nods but doesn't use his name. Flyers for pizza pile up in his mailbox. He sometimes lingers near the coffee bar to watch younger couples head to brunch—coats open, talking too fast, their reflections layered over his in the glass.

Morris calls every Sunday at five. The phone lies flat on the counter, humming, pulsing, offering him the thing he can't pick up. He sees not the man in Australia, the scholar, the oceanographer, but the boy at ten, waving a foam finger a beat too late, more interested in the Jumbotron than the field.

He'd tried to teach that boy football. Tried to show him how the rhythm of downs—the hit, the grind, the reset—was a sort of order in a world with none.

"It seems silly," the boy said. "Wanting to hurt someone over a ball."

Margarete agreed. Proud of his mind. Frances bit down on whatever he'd been about to say and swallowed it. It stuck.

The boy turned to books instead. Minnesota. UCLA. Australia. By twenty-four, an office at the Australian Institute of Marine Science. Oceans his father would only see on screens. Frances was proud. Of course he was proud. Pride just didn't help when the Sunday calls ended and the condo went back to silence. Each time, he told himself *Next week I'll say something real.*

He never did.

He wipes the counters every night until they shine. Drops half-eaten takeout down the chute. Squares the remote with the edge of the table.

After Covid, he tried the VFW. Too many young guys, the desert still in their eyes. He felt like a counterfeit there—too old, too soft, too late to everything. He tried the coffee shop downstairs. The baristas were bright, efficient, polite in a way that said *we see you and we are not going to know you.*

He brought a dozen doughnuts once, left them by the espresso machine. "For the staff," he said. No one asked his name. The box was gone the next day. That was the whole story.
In the elevator, he started nodding too long at people, hoping someone would say his name. After a while, it was easier to stay upstairs.

Through the walls: laughter, arguing, a baby, a dog, pipes. Once, a red rubber ball rolled down the hallway and bumped his door. He stared at it until it seemed like part of the building, then nudged it back with his foot.

He makes the bed tight every morning. His pillow dented, hers smooth. A suggestion of her head, nothing more.

Down the hall, framed pictures: wedding, Morris at ten with a foam finger, Morris at graduation, his arm around Margarete. He dusts them weekly. He doesn't look at them. The only foolish thing he allows to fall out of order is the cake stand on top of the fridge—the glass dome grown cloudy with dust.

It had been a wedding gift, heavy and foolish and perfect. A wide porcelain base with fading violets painted around the lip, the glass cloche that came down over the cake like a spell. She'd kept it high in the cupboard except on special days: birthdays, holidays, any night that needed a little ceremony. Chocolate with buttercream, lemon with poppy seeds, the one red velvet she swore she'd never make again. The glass fogged with sweetness when the candles burned, Frances leaning forward to blow them out while she counted softly: *One to grow on.*

Later, when Morris left for California and then Australia, the stand came down less often. After she died, Frances lifted it onto the top of the fridge. Out of reach. Out of mind. Dust settled.

He looks at it now and feels his throat constrict. Everything has stopped except him. Snow sticks to the corners of the window. A plow scrapes the street below, orange light sliding along the building as if nothing is wrong anywhere.

Two bananas sag on the counter, brown-spotted and leaking sweetness into the air. *Bananas won't keep, Frances. You always buy too many.*

He pulls the chair in and sits at the table again. Lifts the gun. The barrel is colder than he expects. He presses it beneath his chin. His hand trembles. He lowers it, sets it down flat, then snatches it back up, startled by his own movement. The scrape of metal against formica cracks the quiet.

"Coward," he says.

He'd bought the gun after George Floyd's murder. Margarete, one of the only times she seemed truly angry with him, planted herself in the doorway, arms folded.

"A gun, Frances? Really?"

"The world's changing," he'd said. "Streets aren't safe."

"Fine," she'd answered eventually. "But I don't want to see it. And you'll take a safety course."

Quarter to five now. Fifteen minutes until Morris's Sunday call. He's thought about this so long it barely feels like a decision. More like something the day has for him, the way the plant had shifts and Newgate had classes.

If he doesn't answer, Morris will call back. If he still doesn't answer, Morris will call the police. Better that than rotting here for days.

He puts the gun down and reaches for the note. The paper is softened at the folds where his thumbs have worked it.

Dear Morris,

I want you to know I've had a good life. I've been lucky in a lot of ways. And I'm proud of you—you turned out to be a good man. Steady. Decent. But since your mom passed, it's been hard. I didn't expect the quiet to get so loud. Days go by and I barely say a word. Things that used to matter don't anymore. I've felt more and more like I'm just taking up space. Your mom used to say we kept each other grounded. I think she was right. Since she's been gone, I haven't been the same.

Please don't be angry. I'm just tired. I've thought a lot about this, and I want you to understand it's not about you. Or Amelia. I love you both. It's just—I don't know how to do this part. This part after. I've left everything with my attorney. It's all written down, sealed. Cid knows what to do. Take care of each other.

Love, Dad

It's ten to five

The last word blurs. He waits for another sentence to arrive, something small and merciful. It doesn't. He folds the note and sets it beside the gun.

Nine minutes.

He scrolls through photos of Morris and Amelia in Sydney: beach light on their faces, water behind them, their bodies tanned and easy. They belong to a world he cannot imagine himself entering. He feels, suddenly, the grit of sand under his own toes, years earlier, Jersey Shore, Morris laughing, squinting into the sun, a kite string tugging at his hand.

Eight minutes.

He lifts the gun again. The metal under his chin is weightless and absolute. He whispers Margarete's name. Sets it down. Funeral flowers swelling in vases, browning at the edges by the second day. Morris standing in the doorway of the bar, eyes hard.

Seven minutes.

He pours the last finger of whiskey and swallows. The burn is so faint it might as well be water. He thinks of her at the library, explaining how the place worked to people who thought it was just shelves and dust. Her mind full of books, ideas, small joys. The way her hand settled on his shoulder when she wanted to anchor him.

"Would you?" he asks the air. "Would you understand?"

Six minutes.

He wipes his palms on his thighs, takes the gun in both hands now, holds it like evidence. He imagines the scene as the police will see it: the body, the note, the gun, the tidy kitchen. The squeak of a zipper. Boots on linoleum.

"Would you?" he asks again.

Five minutes.

The hospital monitor's last single beep. Then nothing.

Four minutes.

Cake. Frosting. Her humming as she counted candles. The sharp heat of wax when he held one too long. The taste of frosting from her finger. The dome fogging over with sugar fog as Morris leaned in, cheeks puffed.

Three minutes.

He rests the gun in his lap. Breathes once, twice. Somewhere in his head: the hard click of a rotary phone, the laughter of Amelia's baby—his grandchild—skittering down a line from the other side of the world.

Two minutes.

The phone rings.

He jumps. The gun slips, hits the floor with a sound that seems too loud for the room. He stares at it, heart hammering, sweat cooling on his temples. He bends, picks it up carefully by the muzzle, and sets it back on the table, the grip turned toward his hand.

It rings again.

He doesn't move.

It rings a third time, muffled, as if the air has thickened.

He lifts the gun.

The barrel finds the soft spot beneath his chin.

The wrong angle and he'll wake up ruined.

It has to go straight up.

He opens his mouth.

The trigger jerks his finger.

A burst.

A tilt.

Light. Sand in his toes. Morris shrieking with laughter by the water.

The kite string slackening, snapping taut in his hand.

His chest aching with some mix of sun and joy and the fear it won't last.

Lilies. The chemical rasp of sanitizer.

The flare of a match in a dark church basement.

Shadows jumping.

Her hands on his face the day they married.

Morris, small again, in the lake, reaching for him.

A candle guttering, wax trailing down the side,

Margarete whispering, "One to grow on."

The phone still ringing.