

The plot device

Helen Soukhavong

Evidence AL-21708

Item: Foolscap envelope containing (1) handwritten document, (1) newspaper clipping, (1) tarnished device similar to a pocket watch.

Details: All items appear to have been thoroughly handled and quite worn. The envelope was initially well sealed; however, it appears to have been opened and resealed a number of times previously.

The small device features three rotating panels, all displaying the number zero.

A copy of the document and clipping are replicated below.

* * *

As requested, this is a full statement of that night's events. However, I must implore you to cease reading immediately, as continuing endangers my livelihood. Although I would wholeheartedly rather destroy this entire message, my narrative follows thus:

Every Friday evening, as per the usual, Irving Stanton and I would meet in the Oak Horseman's club, and he would often predict our latest new misfortune using tarot cards, or palm-lines, or some other newfangled superstition with little to no basis in scientific fact. These baseless fancies he took with

exceeding earnestness and solemnity, and so it was not unusual when he sat down across from me with a doleful expression and some mad new fascination.

“In less than one thousand words from now,” Irving grimly declared, “We shall die.”

I looked curiously at my good friend. “One thousand words?”

“Yes.” He affirmed. “Well, less now.”

I laughed. “What do you mean by words? These ones? Of which I just used up” — I quickly counted on my fingers — “fifteen?”

“You used twenty-three words, as a matter of fact. I would estimate that we will die at least before the end of this week. Maybe even today.”

His unfalteringly serious and sombre demeanour towards similar unbased fancies had provided a constant source of amusement for me in the past, but such an outlandish statement uttered in such a self-assured manner was too much for me to bear. “Today! Come now, Irving, surely you’ve had too much to drink. But if you’re so sure, I’ll give you ten pounds if we both die before the end of the week. Twice that if we die within the next twenty-four hours.”

“It’s not going to matter much to me when we’re dead. But to satisfy you, I’ll take it.”

“Deal. Now explain this ‘thousand words’.”

From his breast pocket, he withdrew what could easily be mistaken for a pocket watch, except instead of a face, it presented a queer panel of three digits, slowly ticking down. 591. 590. The numbers descended with an irregular rhythm,

and seemed to speed and slow as they liked. “Curious. And who sold you this little knickknack?” As I spoke, I noticed an oddity in the device’s unsteady perambulation. The numbers ticked with the same rhythm as my speech! I fell silent, yet the numbers continued to descend.

“No-one. It was delivered.” The numbers also followed the cadence of Irving! It must have had some gadget to listen to speech. “It was left in my mailbox with a note, threatening my death before the number one hundred, and yours before fifty.” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I think it is linked to the death of Horatio Downing.”

I looked up sharply. “Don’t be foolish. Downing died from consumption.”

“That’s the ‘official’ statement. And yet didn’t we both see him a day before his death, in fine health? And do you not remember how the coroner had such difficulty? They could not find a trace of disease or injury of any sort. They likely claimed consumption to appease the masses. Besides, they found a similar device on his person, remember? He was found limp, clutching it in his hand, just slumped over his typewriter. It was confiscated by the police; however ...”

I stopped listening, and stared down at the little curio. How did it tick? 368. 367. Oh God — The count of the numbers seemed to follow the cadence of my thoughts. “Nonsense.” I handed it back to Irving.

“Downing was examined by an expert, and neither of us are doctors. I’m sure I’d trust a medical professional, as should you.” I looked Irving in the eye. “Downing probably had nothing to do with this. You hear me, Irving? Don’t buy into

these ridiculous conspiracy theories.” It was probably just some cheap child's toy and a hysterical imagination. “Correlation does not equal causation, my friend. I'm sure it has a simple, logical explanation.”

Still — I excused myself and ordered a cab home.

I had a restless night. The device loomed before me, and with its unsteady gait, limped towards me unsteadily. “What are you?” I whispered up at the monstrosity. “What are you?” I spun around. Irving, slack jawed, stared into the sky. 220. 219. Hovering there, the numbers ticked thrice. I stepped back. “In God's name ...” Irving monotonously intoned, voicing my thoughts aloud. “Irving?” His head haltingly turned to face me. His eyes, they -!

I awoke, and stared up into the heavens, cold sweat rolling down the back of my neck.

Shakily, I got up, and groped around for a candle. The safe. Check the safe. God, where did I leave the key — a patting down of my jacket quickly revealed it, and I flung open the safe. Inside, it ticked. 131. 130. My eyes widened.

Irving!

With no regard for my night-wear, I hailed a cab. “Cabbie, quick — 60 Stone Street! I'll tip you double if you go at full speed!” The cabbie tipped his hat. God, if Irving was dead ... I flung my wallet at the cabbie and burst into Irving's house. “Irving!” Irving was slumped over his book in an armchair; the device clutched in his cold hands. 61. 60. No pulse. He died just over 40 words ago.

How it ticks, how it knows! My count is almost up. By God I implore you, please, stop reading, before it ...!

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Wanted for acts of fraud, larceny. Possible connection to the
murders of Downing and Stanton, possible conspiracy.
Missing.

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