

Tic Toc Boom!

A Short Story

*by*

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The phone rang just past midnight.

“Arthur! Arthur, are you awake?”

“Seven seconds ago, I was happily, make that blissfully asleep. But then, some fool, that would be you James, rang me up in the middle of the night and now, to answer your question, I am quite awake, thank you very much.”

“Arthur, I am sorry but this is very serious. We have a big problem. I need your intelligence.”

“My intelligence works far better when it has been well rested.”

“I didn’t ask for your wit; I asked for your intelligence.”

“My wit and my intelligence are inextricably intertwined. It’s a package deal. Take it or leave it.”

“Arthur, we have no time for this banter. Please come over to my office straight away. Do hurry.”

James was the Mayor of Temperaltown and his office was in City Hall. On his walk there, Arthur noted that the watch store, Time Zone, had all its lights on. He thought this rather odd given the late hour.

The front door opened on the first knock and Arthur was greeted by a very distraught James.

“Arthur, I received this fax just over an hour ago. Some fiend is threatening the town. He says that he will detonate a bomb in a central location unless the ‘cancel’ button is pushed by noon. That’s less than twelve hours away. This horrible person is taunting me with riddles about where the ‘cancel’ button might be found but I can’t make heads nor tails of his opaque hints. I need your help.”

James handed Arthur the fax which outlined the threat and then made a series of very odd, cryptic statements:

*At 4:55 all was quiet.*

*The sun rose at 7:05.*

*By 7:10 it was time to lubricate things.*

*At 7:33 it was time for breakfast. I think I’ll have fish, today.*

*By 9:07 the lumberjacks had begun their work after having seen a pig three minutes earlier.*

*A half hour later, one of the lumberjacks had hurt his knee.*

*Don’t forget NOON!*

“Arthur, what do you make of all that gibberish?”

“I have absolutely no idea, James, but I have read worse poetry.”

“Arthur! Be serious! We need to decode this. NOW!”

“OK, James. Calm down. Let’s get to work. Get me a blank piece of paper. Let’s focus first on the times listed.”

Arthur made a column listing, in order, the times mentioned in the fax. He wrote 9:04 for the time the pig was sighted and 9:37 for the time the lumberjack hurt his knee. When he came to the last time, he wrote 12:00 and then, for good measure, wrote NOON next to it.

Arthur stared at the paper for some time, muttering to himself. Then he turned the paper around so that James, who was seated across the table from him, could ponder it.

Suddenly Arthur jumped up from his chair.

“James, do you have a digital clock in your office?”

“Why, yes I do. Why do you ask?”

“Let’s go have a look at it.”

Upon arrival, Arthur asked James to turn the clock over so that it was now facing upside down. There, on the underside of the clock, was a button labeled CANCEL.

James pressed it at once and let out a cry of relief. A moment later his fax machine started up and printed out the following message:

*I see that you have figured out my little riddle. You are cleverer than I thought. I have defused the bomb. I am, after all, a fiend of my word. I'll just have to think of a more difficult problem for my next threat.*

“Arthur, how did you manage that? What gave it away?”

Arthur rewrote the times listed but this time he wrote them as they might appear on a digital clock, in block digits. For the last time, he chose NOON instead of writing digits. Then he turned the paper around so that James was looking at it upside down.

“What does this look like to you, James?”

James looked blankly at the paper for a bit and then a smile crept over his face. The digits, when rotated through 180 degrees, spelled out the following words:

NOON

LEG

LOG

hOG

EEL

OIL

SOL

SSh

The paper being turned around inverted right and left as well as top and bottom, thus the times were in reverse order and upside down. It was important that NOON was spelled all in upper case letters or else it would not have spelled out NOON upon rotation.

Now the clues all made sense. The trick was to rotate the digits as a single block. This turned the numbers into letters and reversed the order. The obvious next step was to rotate the clock, itself. Brilliant!

Arthur considered delivering a short lecture on transformational geometry but then thought the better of it. Mathematical lectures are best given and received in daylight hours.

"I suggest that you send the police around to investigate recent fax activity from the Time Zone watch store," Arthur said. Then he added "I assume that you recently purchased your clock there. Am I right?"

Before the astonished James could answer, Arthur excused himself saying that it was well past his bedtime.