

TIME SPENT

As Mathilda sat at her computer that day and clicked, she noticed the discrepancy straight away. 7.30am. It seemed wrong and it was. Her phone said 7.28am and her computer screen had skipped from 7.27am.

It wouldn't have worried her too much, except it happened yesterday, although only by one minute. Now they had stolen three minutes she would never see again. Last year, when she moved interstate, she had to wind her clock forward 30 minutes. Now in total, she had lost 33 minutes.

She shared her story with her sister, Liberty, a hippy living in the hills and growing strawberries, but she didn't seem to understand.

Liberty was present-focused, always living for the now, living in the moment. "Relax why don't you?" she'd say.

It was okay for her, but without people like me where would we be? Probably back in the Dark Ages, squinting at the sun, trying to figure out the time of day. Losing hours not minutes. Weeks not days.

"Were you conscious the entire time?" Liberty asked, squinting at Mathilda like she was a sun-lit clock.

"Of course I was. How would I have known otherwise?"

Liberty shook her head and kept on picking strawberries like none of it mattered. But it did matter to Mathilda.

Now work was asking her to move overseas and she would need to wind her watch on six hours. They had offered her compensation – an extra day's pay, but they had missed the

point entirely. While time could be spent it could never really be bought. It evaporated, never accessed, unable to be used, never applied. They offered to bring her home once a year so she could collect the time she had lost, but there was never any guarantee she'd get back once things got busy.

She knew that they had never understood in HR. And when she tried to explain, they sent her to see a psychologist, who recommended a meditation course to bring her more into the present. They must be crazy, she thought. You can't switch it on and off like a light. But she liked the candle app they supplied because she could still see the clock in the corner.

But when they asked her to close her eyes and sit cross-legged on the floor, it was simply too much. She explained to the meditation master that it was hard to close your eyes and still see your watch the whole time.

They'd asked her to leave when she set her alarm to indicate the end of three minutes. But it was when the alarm went off that the solution became clear to her. If she moved to a country where time was wound back six hours, she could recoup the loss and be in front.

It was easy to negotiate with HR, who spent most of the day congratulating themselves for suggesting the overseas assignment, without realising Mathilda's true motive.

On the plane over, she made a list of all the things she would do with the six hours she had gained. After some deliberation she'd decided and began executing her plan immediately on landing. Firstly, she made her

way to a bookshop to buy a book to learn Spanish. It was on the way to the bookshop that she noticed him out of the corner of her eye – the man with a knife.

It all happened in flash. He managed to collect her watch, her phone and her iPad before she could call out "*Policia*."

Now she was timeless. Worse still, it seemed that there were no clocks on the outside of buildings and no cafes open, due to the public holiday. She tried to communicate with the locals, but she hadn't bought the book yet and they thought from her dishevelled look that she might be a pickpocket.

As the sun set she assumed it was time to check into her hotel. She thought of Liberty, realising that today they were not so different after all. Arriving at the hotel she was relieved to see both a clock and an English-speaking receptionist.

Her delight quickly turned to dismay when she realised that it was 9pm. She had lost the six hours she'd gained and was behind again. To make matters worse, sharing her story with the concierge obviously opened some old wounds and he went on to recount tales of all the pickpockets he'd encountered, starting from elementary school.

Taking a seat in the foyer, she felt exhausted. It was then she noticed the old man in the wheelchair. He leant over to her.

"Sorry to hear about your troubles today my dear. I was like you too once. Racing towards the finish line. Setting goals. But now none of it matters. The doctor says I don't have much time left. But what does he know about time? What is a little to him might be a lot to me. To

begin with, I calculated how many hours, minutes and seconds I had left. And you know what? I spent all my time staring at my watch instead of living.

"Not living in the moment, just living. I truly understood what it meant to be 'time-bound' because my eyes never left my wrist. I'm telling you this because although time can be spent, it can also be a thief if you let it. Today you might have lost your watch, but you have been given back your time. Spend it wisely my dear."

Story Two

TIME BOUND

When Adam graduated top of his class from university, he thought he'd be designing games or apps, not testing robo-advice for pension funds.

His job was to feed in data from 1973 until now, 2025, then predict future financial disasters for retirees. He broke the monotony every few hours by logging on for a quick game of G. He'd only been at ROBOFIN for six weeks when this happened.

ROBOFIN avatar to Adam: "Sorry to interrupt, Adam. Can I have a minute of your time?"

Adam to Avatar: "Of course you can." (Adam was barely able to contain his excitement).

He turned to his cubicle mate, Eve. "Who is that?"

Eve: "Like her do you?"

Adam: "Sure. She's gorgeous."

Eve: "And she doesn't look familiar at all?"

Adam: "Well, kind of. Does she work here?"

Eve: "She's you, you dummy. The female version. So that you are disarmed."

Adam: "Disarmed! From what?"

Eve smiled. "You'll see."

Avatar: "It seems you're having trouble engaging in your work. We've noticed you've been spending a lot of time playing G. Allow us to help you get reconnected. We'd like to invite you to attend a time-perspective re-alignment. You'll find us down in corridor five, gate three."

Adam: "What the hell is a 'time-perspective realignment?'" (It didn't sound good and, quite frankly, could be painful.)

Eve: "Time perspective is how much people focus on the time, the present and the future. You've obviously been classed as too 'present-hedonistic'. They'll want you to focus on past and the future some more. I should warn you that some people think it can't be changed. But you'd best play along or leave now."

Avatar: "Hello again, Adam. It seems you haven't moved from your chair yet. Do you require an escort?"

Adam: "How does she know where I am? Are their cameras in here?"

Eve: "No, my friend. It's all in the wrist. The watch you got at orientation has a GPS tracking device. It's not called a watch by accident. An alarm also goes off if you step within 150 metres of a competitor's premises"

Adam: "Well, it seems resistance is useless. Back soon. I'll let you know how it goes."

Adam walked down the corridor feeling apprehensive about what was about to happen and knowing that he was being watched. Up ahead, he saw corridor five with a series of five different gates – Past-Negative; Past-Positive; Present-Fatalistic; Present-Hedonistic and Future-Focused. It didn't seem like many Future-Focused people had been sent for realignment because that gate was unmanned.

The girl in the Past-Positive gate smiled and waved, although Adam had never met her before. She seemed full of sunshine. Beside her was a guy about the same age as Adam was moving towards the Past-Negative gate and moaning about how this

sort of thing was always happening to him and recounting tales of other disasters. Adam would be steering clear of him.

At the end of the gate was a room with "Present-Hedonistic" written on the door in large letters. Nothing like a label to set you straight, he thought.

ROBOFIN Avatar: "Hello again, Adam. It's nice to see you. Put on the headphones and watch with me. I think you're going to enjoy this."

Adam doubted it very much. That usually meant it was so bad they needed to sell it to him first.

Images flashed by in quick succession on the screen. People living in poverty through time; the Great Depression; wars; famines; starving children; homeless people of all ages. It was horrific. In the background a phrase kept repeating, "The past exists, but you have a chance to change it".

He was somewhat relieved when optimistic pictures of the future appeared. Everyone was well fed. Living in luxury with the message "You have the chance to build the future. Take it", although the phrase sounded more like a command and less like an invitation.

On the way out, he passed the blonde girl full of sunshine, but now she looked more muted and quite dull.

But on the other hand, Mr Past-Negative had perked up a little and had a slight spring in his step. He wasn't sure what they made of him but he certainly did not feel any different.

Back at his desk precisely 63 minutes later, Adam heard that phrase in his head repeating itself like a bad song. He needed a break from thinking, so he logged on for a quick game of G. Zap. He touched the controls. Zap again. He logged off and back on the ROBOADVICE job and it stopped. Back onto G and it started again.

Adam sat for a while and tried to imagine the future, the images they played in the booth. But all he could see was himself slumped over the keyboard, punching in data and harvesting errors. It was not a future he wanted to think about now or at any time, for that matter. He began removing his watch with his pocketknife, realising that this would conjure up the avatar.

Avatar: "Hello again, Adam. Are you having trouble with the watch that we provided? Do you need a new one? The device can only be removed by a time-keeper. You'll find a time-keeper on the security desk at our front entrance."

Adam grabbed his backpack and headed for the door. He very much doubted that without the watch he would not be allowed back in and he was right.

Three months later. The new app company where Adam worked was not time-bound, but they were glory-bound. He'd already been promoted after the app he'd created called "Awake" hit two-million users. 

HAVE YOUR SAY

Is this your favourite short story? Head to mindfood.com/short_story for information on how to vote.



AUTHOR JOANNE EARL

Dr Joanne Earl (PhD) is a time-obsessed researcher and psychologist, currently working at Flinders University in South Australia. Before joining the university, Earl worked as the program director of the Masters in Organisational Psychology course at the University of New South Wales in Sydney for nine years. She is a registered psychologist and a member of the Australian Psychological Society. When she's not researching or working on campus, she's busy writing short stories, or thinking up characters.



CALLING ALL WRITERS HAVE YOUR SHORT STORY PUBLISHED IN MiNDFOOD ...

Enter our short story competition and you could get published in MiNDFOOD – and be in with a chance to win \$1000.

Each month, MiNDFOOD will publish one reader's short story, with the best story published over the course of a year going on to win \$1000. We are looking for unpublished stories from budding, non-professional writers who may need a nudge to showcase their talent. Each month, the staff of MiNDFOOD will choose the best short story to publish and, at the end of the year, will choose the award for Best MiNDFOOD Short Story.

TO ENTER

Email your story – along with your name, address and telephone number – to mindfoodshortstory@mindfood.com. Entries need to be 2000 words in length and previously unpublished. No MiNDFOOD staff or their family members or relatives are eligible to enter this competition.

For full terms and conditions, please visit mindfood.com.