

## Minutes to Midnight

By R Brent Smith

It is twenty minutes to midnight EST and I am at my station at work. I work in the Russian section. It is just before dawn in Russia, so there is not much happening that needs my attention. This frees me up to work on my differential equations assignment. I like differential equations, the math is easy and the power of the equations, the ability to describe complex physical processes, is amazing. I really lucked in with this job. It pays well and let's me get my physics studies completed while at work. Basically, they pay me to do my homework. I got the job by applying to a sketchy ad posted on an electronic bulletin board at my university. It required the applicant to be fluent in English and Russian, didn't say much else. Most thinking people would have given it a pass, assuming it was something illegal, nefarious. I figured it was worth a try and since my mother was Russian and insisted that we kids speak the mother tongue, I had the only requirement down pat. Turns out, it was a job with the US government, a black ops operation. The security checks were crazy, digging into my family history three generations. It took eight weeks for them to finish the security clearances.

Other people here are fluent in Chinese, Korean, Hindi and Punjabi. Many of the others here are also students; law, economics, mathematics, homework-heavy stuff. I have worked here for about six months; a relative newbie. Others have been here for several years. I started out by saying what a wonderful job this is. But nothing is perfect and there is a dark side to this job. The veterans are hardened to the reality of the job. They just say, "It will never happen, don't worry so much". Me, like the other rookies worry about what the job means. We get together over our

meal breaks and exchange our worries and fears. We discuss what we would do if our jobs actually had a positive result. Yes, that's right; we worry about a positive result from this job. We all want this job to produce nothing, day after day, year after year. Just leave us alone so we can get our homework done.

I am deep into solving a differential equation when my head set beeps; an incoming call. On the screen in front of me are displayed the phone numbers of the caller and receiver. The call was placed at 6:45 Moscow time, fifteen minutes to midnight, our time. Beside the phone numbers, are displayed the names of the parties. It is Igor Sokolov making the call. He is the Russian Secretary of Defence. He is calling Marina, his mistress. The conversation is graphic in nature. Basically, Igor, at work early, is horny and needs to talk about his urges; what he would do with Marina if only she were there. Marina is sympathetic but can do nothing over the phone. She promises to meet with him in the afternoon. Igor groans that he can't wait so long and hangs up. The image of a randy old man with morning wood is now stuck in my head. The differential equation is forgotten. This is the kind of invasive work we do. Other departments might use this affair to twist Igor's arm on some issues of national interest, but that is not our interest. I write a short report and send it to my superiors. They will send it on to those who deal in government-sponsored influence and blackmail.

That call was yucky. I take off my head set and stand and stretch. Around me, I observe our office space. It is a bunker, hidden deep underground. It is a rectangular room of grey, windowless cement walls. The space is filled with cubicles, some thirty in total, in a five by six array. Each cubical is assigned a two-digit designation, like a bingo card. I am in cubicle D5, fourth column over, fifth row down. The place is quiet. I can hear the sound of a few people typing,

either doing their homework or making a report on a call as I just did. I exit my cubicle and head for the washroom.

On my way back to my office, I stop in the cafeteria. The large clock on the wall shows ten minutes to midnight. Things will be heating up on the phones soon as it will be morning in Russia now, approaching 7:00 am. There is a snack machine there and I select a bag of chips; dill pickle. I open the bag in the cafeteria and walk slowly back to my cubicle munching on the salty, tangy treat.

Back at my cubicle I see that there has been no further activity, still too early there for people to be making calls. For some reason, I note that the time is now seven minutes to midnight. I dive back into my differential equation, if I finish this last one, I can submit my assignment and be done with it. That is great but waiting for my attention is an assignment in fluid mechanics. Although filled with differential equations, fluid mechanics is, well, too fluid. It is complex and indefinite. I always leave this assignment to the last. I manage to get by, but I hate not being in control of the subject matter. I should have known I was in trouble when it took me two weeks of lectures to figure out that the professor, who had a thick Chinese accent, was pronouncing 'liquids' as 'rickets'.

My thoughts are interrupted by a sudden bustle of activity, concentrated around cubicle B2, its red alarm light flashing. Jennifer is working that station now, also part of the Russian section. The heads of my colleagues pop up above the cubicle barriers, like so many groundhogs poking out of their tunnels. All eyes and ears straining toward the activity in cubicle B2. First the shift supervisor, Brad rushes there. After a short intense conversation between Jennifer and Brad, he makes a call. Moments later, in rushes Agent Smith. She is already on her phone to someone higher up the chain when she flies past my cubicle. The groundhogs exchange looks, worry and

concern, fear and disbelief all expressed in those looks. These are the looks of people who face certain, world changing doom. Standing, peering over my cubicle walls, I glance back to my computer screen. No activity. I note that the time now reads five minutes to midnight. I know that Jennifer in cubicle B2 listens to the phones of the friends and relatives of the Russian Prime Minister. A call from one of these phones has caused her enough concern that she hit her alarm.

Sonja in Cell C5, beside me, suddenly stiffens. We lock eyes. Hers are wide, frightened. She is assigned to the cell phones of the friends and relatives of the Russian Chief of Staff. She has just read a text message sent by this man to his oldest daughter. In Russian it says, "It is time. Call your sisters and get to the country house without delay." Sonja presses the alarm button on her desk. Messages are sent out automatically to her supervisor and up the chain of command of our organization. A red light begins flashing on her cubicle. Heads swivel toward her cubicle. The fear in those faces intensified.

Within minutes more agents detect similar communications and the alarms in their cubicles are activated. It seems the entire section assigned to the Russian hierarchy is exploding. Yet, mysteriously, my phones stay quiet. Apart from being a horny old bastard, Sokolov is a proud and involved grandfather. It seems odd that this doting grandfather has not tried to contact his grandchildren. This gives me hope. Maybe this is all a false alarm.

With red lights lit on cubicles all around me, I absentmindedly reach for my cell phone in my back pocket. As I do this, I realize that it is not there. Personal cell phones are forbidden in our work space, for obvious reasons. The hair on my scalp prickles. I look at my screen again and note the time one minute to midnight. So much has happened in the last few minutes.

There are checks and protocols to run through to authenticate these messages, to ensure that they indicate what we think they do. The fact that multiple incidences are occurring within

such a short period of time though, tells us that this is real. We don't need some deep mind AI analysis to correlate the information, put a probability to it. We know in our sinking hearts that this is real.

Sarah in the cubicle E4 kiddie-corner to me is sobbing. The reality of the situation has gotten to her. Myself, I still am holding out that this isn't real. My phones give no evidence of this. But if I am wrong, time has run out on a world that should have done better. It just so happens that now is a perfect storm of political failure. In power at the same time are three egotistical, corrupt, self-promoting blowhards. The three control the most powerful countries in the world. They have no love for one another, exchanging cruel jabs on social media, as if by pointing out the flaws in the others makes one a better person. This might work for thirteen-year-old kids but should never have been the alternative to proper diplomacy for the most powerful world leaders. The Russian President has gotten himself entangled in a border war that he cannot admit to losing nor can he win. His foe is receiving a flood of weaponry from European countries and these are chewing up his armoured columns. He has warned the Europeans to stop the supply or face consequences. They ignore him. He has reached the end of his rope and has decided to strike with all the force at his disposal. He has ordered a nuclear strike on Europe, to destroy their ability to wage war, punish them for ignoring his warnings. It is the immediate consequences of this order that we are experiencing in our bunker.

We frightened groundhogs work in a spy agency. One where we never want to complete our mission for that would mean that the end of the world is nigh. Our mission is to provide the early warning of a nuclear launch. We don't accomplish this through high tech satellite surveillance or deeply embedded moles or secret decryption technology. We don't have that device in every science fiction story that tells you when the alien space ship energizes its

weapons. We simply eavesdrop on the cell phones of the friends and relatives of the chain of command of the nuclear nations. Consider yourself one of those in the chain of command that decides or relays the order to launch. Your first human reaction after learning of the intent to launch would be to call your loved ones. Give them a heads up, time to scramble to safety. No officer, no matter how dedicated to the cause, would leave his or her loved ones to fry in the nuclear fires. By intercepting those calls, we get an early warning of what is to come. It is a genius solution. We get to know of the order to launch before the message even gets transmitted to the men who will launch the missiles.

Unknown to me is that the lack of communication from the Secretary of Defence is because he has been detained. He too strenuously objected to the Russian President's order to launch. For his troubles, he was arrested, losing his chance to warn his family and friends.

The time is now seconds to midnight. Agent Smith comes to my cubicle. "Anything?"

I hold out my hands helplessly. "Nothing. Not a single call."

Agent Smith screws up her face. "Something must have happened to him." Smith speaks into her phone, "We are calling it. The order to launch has been given. Put our forces on alert." My heart sinks. It is midnight and the Doomsday clock has run out of time. I hear other reactions from around the room, cries of dismay, "How can this be happening?" I hear cries of frustration, "Let us out so we can contact our families!" I hear cursing at the world that has come to this point. Me, I want to scream. Scream at the madness that has gotten us here. Scream because I am helpless. I can't call my family or friends. I can't do anything to give them a chance to prepare for what is to come in mere minutes. I want to scream at the madmen in power who don't know what they have done. Scream for the billions of lives that are about to be lost. Scream for the destruction of our beautiful planet, perhaps unique in the entire universe. Scream out my

frustration and helplessness. But instead, I slump down in my chair, staring at my unresponsive screen, the sound of Sarah sobbing spilling over the top of my partition.

I imagine the world above us a fiery hell of nuclear detonations. The vapour trails of the in-coming ballistic missiles tracing their descent to their targets. Entire cities turned into raging fireballs. I visualize the flash of the nuclear detonations searing people where they stand. I imagine the shock waves moving at hundreds of miles and hour smashing everything in their wake. My family and friends, everyone I know will be asleep. I pray that their end comes quickly and mercifully.

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I am on campus, a cool sunny autumn day. The leaves of the trees have turned brilliant hues of red, orange and yellow. The walkways are littered with curled up served-their-purpose leaves. I am killing time, enjoying the gorgeous fall stage, enjoying life. My international diplomacy class doesn't start for another thirty minutes. You see, I figured after the terror in that bunker some months ago, I needed to do more for the world than solve differential equations. I switched my major to be trained to be a diplomat. I want to do what I can to ensure that the world never comes to atomic midnight again.

So you are wondering what happened that day when the Doomsday clock ticked to midnight? Well, when it comes to relaying that command to unleash the nuclear hell storm, when it comes to pushing the button to launch mass destruction, ordinary men do not have the inhumanity to complete the task. Orders were blocked, launch codes strangely lost, buttons remained un-pressed. A very small fraction of missiles actually launched and these were destroyed by our antimissile defences that were ready and waiting thanks to our work in that bunker. A counter-strike was never ordered, cooler heads prevailed. The world was saved by the

actions of many people who had the moral fibre to question what they were about to unleash. It restores one's faith in humanity.

After this event, the world realized that we can't rely on our political systems to ensure that madmen don't acquire the power of nuclear destruction. A global court was established to enforce diplomacy and proper etiquette when it comes to international relations. All leaders and governments are now expected to behave within the new diplomatic guidelines. So diplomacy is back and I intend to be a part of it.