

## IN A MOMENT OF TIME

I was sitting with my back to the door, editing a letter to a client, when I heard a voice say, "Excuse me, but the help you need is at hand."

Swiveling quickly around, I saw a middle-aged man dressed in a light green suit reclining in one of the leather chairs across from my desk, one leg crossed casually over the armrest. He was of medium height, a little heavy, but not fat, with thinning hair that was fluffed up a little on both sides above the ears.

"Beg your pardon?" I said. I glanced to my secretary's office to see how this stranger could have managed to slip by unannounced and saw that she was not at her desk.

"I said," the stranger continued, "if you will but spare me some of your day, I can provide the things you need, show you the way, even give you what you want."

Oh great! I thought. Another one of those office-to-office salesmen. I told him that I didn't need any peanut brittle, original oils, or "rare Indian bracelets."

He chuckled a little, then leaned across the desk, winked, and said, "No, you don't understand, or you don't hear, whichever of the two, it doesn't really matter. So I will again say, once, twice, or thrice. I have the answer, even though you don't yet know the question."

There I was, with my back to my 10th story window with a riddle-speaker, maybe crazy, between me and the door. My mind flashed back to the time a lady had requested an appointment and then proceeded to tell me about how the Jews had put a "bullet-brain" in her head. Like then, I felt the slight chill that always comes when real world craziness manifests itself in front of me. Did he have a gun or knife under his coat? Nothing to do but talk.

"So tell me, then," I said, leaning back and trying to relax. "What's the big secret you hold?"

The stranger stood up, tapped his head with a forefinger, and said, "Come with me, unless, look around if you will, you feel you belong here instead of in another place." He looked over his shoulder and said, "You might be surprised by what you find outside." He walked out of my office, through the reception room, and into the hall.

He was crazy, right? But where was he going?

Why I did it I still don't know. Maybe it was the imp of the perverse or maybe it was just my curiosity and like I always say, "Inquiring minds want to know." So, I punched up my calendar, saw that I was free for an hour, put on my coat and followed my strange visitor.

Stepping into the hall, I found him waiting with a dozen or so other people, some of whom I recognized as other occupants on my floor. Without a word, he made for the elevator and we fell in step behind. We were all silent, too.

As we went out the front doors of the building, a street bum approached. "Hey, mister," he said to the green suited man. "Got a quarter for a fella who's down on his luck?"

"A quarter, indeed," replied our leader, reaching into his pocket. "I have a quarter, good friend. I have a dollar, too. And, if I look hard enough," he balled a dollar bill in his fist, blew into it, and pulled out a hundred, "I may even find, let me see, something more for you."

He handed over the hundred dollars and said, "Let's be gone, folks, we don't want to waste a good day." Our group started around the corner while I tarried and watched the beggar as he just stood there for a minute, staring at that bill. He jawed toothless gums together for a few moments and then moved off in a shambling gait.

"Why did you do that?" I asked after I caught up with the group. "You know he's going to go buy enough Thunderbird to stay lit for a week. Hell, he might even die of exposure, alcohol poisoning, or whatever."

"Yes, I expect he may. But, don't you see, that is what I do, why I am here. I say as I've said before, that I can give you all that you want."

Walking beside me was a stylishly dressed stockbroker from down the hall and who was not long out of college. He said, "Well, do you have one of those quarters for me? I could use a little extra change for my date tonight."

Mr. Whatever-his-name, for he had never introduced himself, put his arm around the young man. "AH HA! A little money for your honey. Just enough to buy some good wine to lighten her head, make her flow smooth and spread out on your bed. But you can have that without me. No, what I have for you," he gestured with his arm to include our little group, "what I have for all of you is something very different than what you have imagined. Yes, something quite unusual, but quite common, though you may not have noticed it for what it is."

He turned down an alley that, judging from the syringes on the ground, was frequented by i.v.. drug users. Sure enough, as we passed a back doorway, we saw the familiar sight of an addict pulling a tourniquet tight on his arm with his teeth. Our leader held up his hand for us to halt, much as cavalry officers do on old late-night westerns. The junkie made his fix, looked up, locked eyes with our guide, and said, "I know you." With that simple statement, he slumped down and drifted into oblivion.

Our guide, if that is what he was, gave use the signal to move on. The stockbroker muttered under his breath to me. "Wasting a hundred dollars on a drunk who will probably be back in front of our building tomorrow afternoon. Stopping to watch a dooper shoot up. What are we doing here?"

I was bundled up against the biting wind that was whipping down the alley and was wondering myself just how much longer I could afford to satisfy my curiosity following this singularly odd fellow. Before I had time to make some sort of time limit before returning to the office, we turned the corner and went into the lobby of the newest, and tallest, building in town.

"Into the elevator, ladies and gentlemen, if you please." Mr. Green Suit pressed the "UP" button to hold open the doors. "Up we go to the top, and from there I will deliver that which you seek. It won't be long now, especially for those of you who wear a clock next to your heart, and I'm quite certain you will find that the walk has been quite worthwhile."

As we all crowded in, elbow to elbow, I couldn't help but notice that the sign in the elevator said, "9 passengers, maximum," and there was probably a baker's dozen of us. Our leader was standing next to me and he patted my arm. "Not to worry," he said. "Those rules may apply to others, but not now and not here. It is perfectly safe, I can assure you. Or, somewhat so, anyway."

I must be crazy I thought, yet, somehow, I trusted implicitly in his words.

I don't remember the feeling of heaviness that comes when an elevator accelerates upwards, but suddenly, with a slight "whoosh" the doors opened to the rooftop. I had never been in this particular building before, but I just couldn't imagine that a passenger elevator would go above the top floor.

"Right this way," said our leader as he walked out along a wooden pathway laid down on the gravel and tar and gestured for us to follow. "We are almost there. Oh yes. I have already prepared the way. You will find this easier than you think, far better than you thought." He walked up to the side of the four foot retaining wall that circumscribed the rooftop.

We all walked over, in ones and twos, and looked. Down below there was nothing but the sidewalk and street.

"This is enough!" I said. "Is this some kind of trick? Why, pray tell, have you taken us on this wild goose chase? Do you think we have nothing better to do than to tag along following somebody who speaks of promises but holds out empty hands.

"Oh, but you are wrong. My hands are not empty at all." He reached behind a ventilation shaft and brought out a footstool. "Quite wrong indeed. There is nothing

concealed, nothing falsified. Here, all truths are revealed. Look with me, if you will, and see if you don't see what I have for you. Come a little closer. Look up, look down, look all around." He waved his arms to encompass the world beyond the building. "This is what I have to offer."

Our little group, diverse as we were yet all apparently unified to a degree because we had, for whatever personal reason that motivated us each, decided to follow this mysterious personage, stood by the retaining wall. Had we believed, without any evidence, this man's nebulous offer? Were we so tired of our daily existence that we thought that a little diversion would be, at the very least, a break in routine and a source of entertainment? Or, was there something hidden in our depths that led us to be lured by this pied piper's tune?

An older man, an attorney who I knew had been treated for lung cancer, put both hands on the wall. The wind intensified, boiling over the ledge and into our faces, tearing our eyes. His hair, streaked with gray, had been parted low on one side and combed over the top to cover his balding top and now whipped back and forth, flapping like a bird wing. I saw him tense the muscles in his shoulders and back. "Yes," he said calmly, "I think I understand now."

Quietly, quickly, Mr. Green Suit placed the footstool before him. Before any of us could move, the lawyer stepped up and stood on the wall. He took his wallet and from his pocket and flung it over the side. "This is what I've been doing all along," he said to no one in particular. Then, arms outstretched, he leaned forward. The wind quicken even more, holding him up until, finally, when he was almost at a forty-five degree angle, it abruptly ceased. We stood mesmerized as the attorney fell, seemingly in slow motion. Finally, he hit the sidewalk below and the sound of his final encounter, like the noise a bullet makes when it hits a deer, floated up to us.

No one screamed. The attorney was stretched face down on the cold concrete. The people down below, scurrying about like ants on a trail, stepped over and around him.

"Who's next? Who wants to trade, now? Surely it is clear, surely you know how." Mr. Green Suit was standing on the wall, balanced on one foot. The question was posed and hung in the air, even though it should have been blown away just as were the occasional bits of paper that flew past as the wind resumed.

The young stockbroker took a step up. He poised on the edge, shoulders and head back, knees locked, and arms together out front. With a Tarzan yell, he leaped up and out, tucked his knees in, and did a forward back flip on the way down, opening into a perfect dive position just before smacking the sidewalk.

"Very good!" our leader said. He was sitting astride the wall, swinging his legs to and fro. "That is the best one I've seen yet, and I've seen a lot. Let the show continue."

A lady climbed up. She was forty something and her face had more frown lines than smile lines. As the wind swirled around, her long black skirt alternately billowed out and collapsed, like a giant, coal dust stained lung. She swayed back and forth, eyes shut tight, and arms outstretched like a charismatic worshipper. Just as I thought that she, too, was going to make that fatal, irrevocable decision, she backed down and ran for the elevator.

"Win some, lose some, but my batting average is higher than you think, especially when you consider the game being played." Our leader was again standing on the ledge, balanced on one foot. He hopped into the air, landed on the other foot.

One by one, the others took their turn. Most jumped. Some did so with fanfare and some just silently, almost peacefully, took that small step into forever...or oblivion. A few, though, followed the lady with the black skirt off the rooftop and back to their safe world.

"It's just you and me, now," Mr. Green Suit said . I looked and saw that I, indeed, was the last. "Either way, fast or slow, you have to go back down. You can't stay here."

I slipped off my shoes, climbed the footstool, and stood on top of the wall. Out in the distance, I could see the horizon, and for the first time it struck me how insignificant the earth was in comparison to the sky with its inverted gray bowl of autumn clouds. Looking down, I saw the ant-people running here and there, but my reason for thinking they looked like ants was not because of their size but because of how they ran in small trails, only unlike ants who stop to touch antennas to communicate, the people carried invisible shields to avoid touching as they went about their errands.

My toes were extended over the side. My coat flapped away from my body and stood out like a cape. Mr. Green Suit commented, "Superman. You look just like Superman with your cape streaming out back. Don't you just feel like Superman, too? Or, at least just like the actor who played him in the old black-and-whites must have felt at the end; does the wind feel as cold as steel in your mouth?"

The significance of his statement didn't escape me. The finality of the situation asserted itself. This was real! I felt like, once in my life, I had total control. It was a heady feeling, almost like having too much too drink, only much, much more encompassing. To a certain extent, I did feel like Superman: it would be wonderful to fly through the air, and even if my body fell, wouldn't my spirit surely soar? I made my decision.

"Good boy! I knew you had it in you. Knew it from the first. I could tell you were just ripe for a different choice, that you would be ready when you heard my voice."

I smiled, and leaned forward. At that moment, I noticed the attorney who had jumped first. He was now on his back, legs out straight, and with his arms stretched out from either side. From his side a little river of blood ran down into the gutter. As my center of gravity began to shift forward, I suddenly changed my mind...I wanted to live. Regardless of the pain, misery, and uncertainty of the world, I wanted life...I chose life.

I flailed my arms, trying to regain my balance. The visitor laughed, obviously entertained by my antics. I tottered back and forth, swinging my arms in wide arcs, kicking one leg out, and doing everything possible to avoid going over the ledge. At the very end, when I felt myself tilt irretrievably toward the void, a sudden forceful gust of wind caught my coat and pulled me backwards. As I fell away from the wall, I saw the man in the green suit shake his head and fade into nothingness.

Acting on reflexes, I put my arms out behind me to break my fall and instinctively closed eyes in anticipation of the pain of a broken wrist or two. But, I fell into something soft. Opening my eyes, I saw that I was in my chair. The door to the suite opened and my secretary walked in, carrying a cup of coffee. "I went downstairs for coffee for a minute," she said through the open door. "Don't forget your meeting with Mr. Cohen in an hour." As she sat down, she leaned back in her chair, looked into my office, and added, "Why are you wearing your overcoat?"

I just gave her a wave of my hand, my signal that I am distracted and will talk to her later. When I stood up to take off my coat, I noticed that my shoes were missing.

Occasionally, I go up to the top of that building. There, I pull up a familiar footstool and climb up on the ledge, feeling that sense of power. And each time, I can almost imagine a figure in a green suit sitting there, smiling, watching, and waiting.



**File Name:** In A Moment In Time

**Product description:** This story is a reality twist in that it is not fantasy, but could be an “imaginings” of the main character. Or not. The reader can decide. Ultimately, we have the power over our life and the temptation to use that power is, at times, enticing. Recent books have been written on suicide and In A Moment In Time addresses this issue in a psychological/religious manner (there are Biblical references).

**Author Biography:** Mike Sledge is an author who rediscovered his desire and ability to write well into adulthood. He has won several fiction awards and has a fictional psychological thriller in process. Author of several financial study guides for those in the accounting and investment business, his first major publication, *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen*, by Columbia University Press, 2005, is a diversion from his main interest of finding the hidden themes in everyday activities. He lives in Boulder County, Colorado, where he rides his mountain bike, snowboards, camps, and hikes when not writing.

**Author Bibliography:** *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen*. Columbia University Press. ISBN 0-231-13514-9 (cloth) 0-231-50937-5 (electronic).

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