

**Short
Story
Contest**
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[Untitled]

by **Grace Bass**

PROMPT: You find a Polaroid camera that seems to predict the future: its pictures show what will happen exactly 5 minutes from the moment you take them.

Leo had always thought the end of the world would be loud. Sirens, screams, the echoing rumble of a fire’s belly, and somewhere beneath it all the angels crying softly. All he heard that afternoon, however, was the low hum of the neighbor’s electric lawnmower and the crackle of radio static as Flora May tried desperately to send a signal through their tiny a.m. radio. “Any luck?” he asked again, fingering the silver button on the camera. It should have been a simple thing, something he used to take stupid pictures of them together, crooked shots of the sunset or her smile. It was not.

“No.” He heard the tears in her voice, and he did not watch this time as she scrubbed the back of her shirtsleeve across her nose, even as he felt her arm brush his. There was a handful of seconds more of the radio wandering aimlessly through stations, bits of broken voices interrupting the humid evening with fragments of a song or the jagged edge of a sentence. It was not long before she cursed again. “Damn it!”

The radio went silent.

He watched as she hurled it across the driveway, where it landed with a resounding crack a few yards away, the pieces splintering into a pile of broken shards and veiny wires. “What do we do?” she whispered.

Leo did not know. All he had was a picture of the end of the world and a girl sitting next to him who had never been ice skating. That was what they had been talking about before they took the photo. Come Christmas, he was going to take her to see some of his relatives up in Michigan, and they were going to go ice skating on the frozen lake behind their house. He had promised her hot chocolate and told her that he was terrible too, even though he was decent, so when they fell it wouldn’t be her fault.

“I’m sorry, Flora May,” he said, wishing he could somehow unwind the reel of the last two months and burn it, right from the moment they found the camera in a brown paper box and nestled in their mailbox like a fledgling cuckoo deposited in the wrong nest. There was no return address, no shipping address either. Flora May had wanted to return it to the post office, but Leo did not see what good that would do. “It’s not like they’ll be able to figure out who it belongs to,” he had said, his fingers already edging beneath the wrapping.

The first thing he had taken a picture of was the rosebush Flora had just planted in their flower bed.

He still remembered pulling up the image, which glowed faintly on the screen, and frowning at the water droplets that glittered on the surface. In those first few weeks of July, North Carolina had been experiencing one of its hottest heat waves since the 80s, the loud kind that cranks up the volume along with the heat, all crunching grass, AC units turned to full blast, the cicadas’ nightly performance, and the wind flirting with the full oak trees. There were lots of humid days that made you wish you could shuck off your own skin, but any water remained trapped in the sweat slicked glasses of sweet tea and puddles of dripping water from bathing suits hung out to dry.

Leaning down as far as he could without bringing the flower out of focus, Leo had snapped another shot of the rosebush. There they were again—drops of water shimmering on the pale pink petals like tears on a cheek in the faintly glowing image, but when he lifted the eyepiece and stared at the real thing, it was bone dry.

“Flora May!” he had called over the low buzz of cicadas beginning to tune their bodies for the evening. “Come here.” He motioned her over to where he was seated in one of the flowerbeds.

She had poked her head up from the porch swing. “What?”

“Come over here and look at this.”

With a sigh, she had swung her legs over the porch swing and stalked to the railing. There was a glass of iced ginger ale in her hands as she leaned her arms against it and looked down at him with a curious smile. “What is it?”

Leo had opened his mouth to speak, but before the explanation could tumble into the air, his eyes glanced across the rosebush, which was now dusted with a fine sheen of droplets. His mouth snapped shut. “The hell?” he muttered to himself. He leaned down and brushed a finger against one of the petals, and it came away sticky. Frowning, he sniffed it.

“May, did you spill something on this?”

“A little bit of this,” she said, nodding to the half full glass of soda.

That moment was when the inkling had started. First as a touch of unease in his stomach, then a sensation in the tips of fingers. Flora May would tell him later that he was making it up, coating poetic license in a cast of gold.

Next, he had taken a picture of Flora, and again something was amiss. There was the railing, stark white with fresh paint and reflecting the sunlight like a freshly polished halo, and behind it was the house they were staying in for the summer. A fly buzzed off to the right, but where Flora May stood staring down at him now with a pinched brow and that little frown, in the camera’s image there was simply more house. In the next five minutes, he finally convinced her to take a look for herself, and together their minds went racing.

It was a new technology shipped from some foreign lab to be tested on American guinea pigs. A prototype for state of the art espionage equipment sent to the wrong address or strange camera tech the big cell phone companies were vying for and had sent to potential customers.

They threw out magic, miracles, and messages from dead relatives, though neither of them really believed any of those ideas. Those were the ones born out of the thrill of mystery rather than the meticulous path of discovery. All afternoon they spent with that little black camera, snapping shots of the gardens, the sky, each other. The more they took, the more the mystery grew. Some photos were exactly the same. Others had entire pieces missing or a different cast to the shadows.

Come evening, their curiosity was a tangible thing between them, hard and thrilling like the last swig of whiskey. It was not until they took their adventure inside and Leo took a photo of Flora May posing with a book in front of the fireplace that they figured it out. Well, Flora did.

“Look,” her finger smudged the screen as she pointed to the top of the image. “The clock’s off.”

Leo followed her gaze, and sure enough, the big hand was five tick marks away from where it slugged lazily along in real time.

Things began clicking into place. Take a picture of Flora May, who moved out of the scene within seconds, and five minutes later she is looking over your shoulder at an image of an empty scene. Take one of the old Ford Fiesta in the driveway and it is the spitting image. Five minutes into the future—a rare glimpse through the crack of a door time usually kept firmly closed. They had looked at one another, when they realized what it meant, and neither of them spoke what both were thinking: what sort of secrets were hidden in 300 seconds?

At first it was dumb things. They would take a picture of the cherry pie in the oven to make sure it wouldn't burn in the next five minutes or the pot of water to make sure it wouldn't boil over while one of them went to use the bathroom. In the mornings, Flora May would take a picture of herself in the mirror so she didn't have to decide what to wear for the day, and Leo would take a picture of coffee pot to see how full it would be in five minutes just because he could.

They were sure there was a better use of it. They spent late nights huddled under the blankets, warm fingers trailing over bare skin while they whispered the endless possibilities to one another. To be the first to see who would win the election come November or win jeopardy. To know the exact time of the gold medalist before he ever ran the race. To taste the new year before the ball dropped, see the sunrise before the birds, know the winner before the game had come to a close. To be the only people who lived five minutes ahead. Leo thought about taking it to the press, but he did not know what they would do with it. He still thought about what would have happened if they had taken the camera back to the post office. A part of him wondered if it simply would have disappeared. It still had not seemed real.

One day, Flora May used it when she was watching the news, and the two of them found out before any other viewer that Neil Armstrong had died at 82. They used their extra seconds to quietly turn off the TV and pretend that the world was not changing so fast.

Sometime in late September they had a fight that drove Flora May out the back door and into the woods around the house, tears streaming down her cheeks and empty promises weighing her down. Leo sat on the back porch all night, taking picture after picture of the tree line until he saw two figures walking back, their arms wrapping around one another, and he swore he had never run so fast in his life.

As most shiny things do, eventually, it lost its excitement. It started spending nights on the dresser instead of the nightstand, and days went by when neither had any a burning desire to speed up the clock. When he got the call that his mother was in the hospital, Leo left it tucked under the bed. He did not want to know if she was going to make it before his father did, even though he had thought about it long enough that Flora May wrapped her arms around him and asked him what was wrong.

Neither could have said what made them take it back out tonight. It could have been a quiet whisper neither could quite place, the brush of fate's cold fingers against the back of their necks, or maybe time itself, who seemed to have given them this gift and was finally showing them why.

Leo had taken Flora by the hand when they were finished discussing their plans for that winter.

“Come on.” He opened the front door and led her onto the front steps. “Let’s watch the sunset before the rest of the world.”

They sat there then, not far from where they had made their great discovery, and leaned into the southern air, letting its warm, bubbling waters seep up past their ears and tangle in their hair. Without thinking, he snapped a picture of the two of them, forgetting that he could not capture the quiet smile that ghosted Flora May’s lips, or the backlit wisps of hair that brushed her face. She reminded him though, after he had taken it. Leo chuckled, turning the camera around to look at the image.

Time, it seemed, had given them a 300 second warning.

Flora had run for the phone, and when the signal would not come through, the radio. But they both knew it would not do any good. The camera had never been wrong before.

They sat there on the porch, eyes glued on the horizon, as their five minutes dwindled to three and then two. Flora May kept wiping at her eyes.

“Do you think it’ll hurt?” she whispered.

Turning, Leo looked her up and down, at her tattered jeans and faded t-shirt, the pink streak she had dyed in her hair just because she could, the freckles splashed across her nose like stars. “No.”

He kissed her.

Their neighbor turned off his lawnmower, and then all Leo could hear was Flora May’s hiccupped breathing and the low buzz of cicadas. A soft breeze brushed his cheek, as if to say farewell.

Two minutes turned into one, and this time she kissed him.

One minute turned into thirty seconds, and thirty trotted down along the number line. A shadow seeped across the driveway that did not seem to have an origin. Leo felt Flora May’s hand reach out and squeeze his, and the cicadas quieted. All he heard was her breath, shallow and soft as she lay her head on his shoulder. The sky darkened to charcoal, and a coppery tang filled his next breath.

Three hundred seconds had become three all too quickly. Then it became two.

“Leo,” Flora May breathed, “I think—”