

Time to Think

It was a normal day in Dim Village. The wind howled and the rain poured, no different to any of the days that had preceded it. The people were the same as they always were, like robotic mechanisms on a loop, choosing to stay indoors to avoid the inevitable thunderstorm. The only people out were the school children, who had been begrudgingly forced out the house by their parents. They sat at their desks, gazing out the window as the rain came down upon the streets, triggering the street lights to activate. The teacher had given up on the lesson, and sat square at his desk, with his eyes firmly fixed on his computer screen.

Amongst the other students in the class, Anthony Smith sat with one hand on his book and the other on his forehead, again.

Eventually the bell went to signify the end of the day. The pupils flooded out onto the roads and hurriedly into their houses through the rain to see their parents.

“Terrible day, isn’t it?” Anthony’s mother said to him as he walked in drenched through the door. There was no need for a reply; she could see all she needed to from the frown on his face. “I was wondering, what would you like for your dinner tonight?”

“I don’t know, anything.” Replied Anthony.

“Now, your friend called, he wanted to know whether...” She stopped and turned to Anthony, but he had already left to go upstairs.

As his mother sat downstairs, Anthony opened the window above and gazed out to try and spot any sign of relief from the torrential downpour, though all he could see were the dark clouds and the constant bullets of rain leaving them. Damp and disenchanted, he logged on to his computer, upset once again about the humdrum of his life. He slumped in his seat and looked up the weather forecast for the next three days, but there was something evidently different about the website today that hadn’t been there the last time he checked. The weather forecast only foresaw the events up till 19:18 that evening, and then they just stopped completely, instead of going right through to the next week ahead. Maybe the network was down he wondered, and didn’t take any notice of it, heading to another website for the information he needed...

He blinked his eyes; it couldn’t be true, could it? The website gave the same results as the last one, and the next one, and the next one, and all the ones he could possibly find. Confused, he typed 19:18 into a search engine and awaited the results. Nothing, apart from one result. He double clicked and waited anxiously. His eyes ran down the screen and soaked up the information; there was just one word scrawled on the monitor, in thick red writing.

STOP

What could it mean? He moved his eyes further downwards, and to his disbelief saw a countdown timer.

1:18

He checked the clock in his bedroom, 6pm exactly, he then looked back at the screen.

1:17

The sums all added up, the countdown timer was set to stop tonight, at 19:18. Anthony took no notice; he had heard about these internet hoaxes all the time, and he wasn’t having any of it, so switched his computer off and switched his television on. But that was just the start of the madness for Anthony, because as he switched on his television he was once again shocked by what he saw. Instead of going onto channel

1, or 2, or even 3, the television immediately went to channel 1918, and on the screen was the very same thing as he saw on his computer.

STOP

1:14

He pressed the remote to change the channel to BBC1 but nothing happened, he tried again, and again, but nothing, he banged the remote on the table and tried again, but still the channel did not change.

He took the batteries out to check if they had expired, he had never replaced the batteries in the remote before, in the 6 years he had it, besides, this was obviously just something normal happening, he wouldn't let himself get carried away and start linking everything together to form some sort of paranormal theories.

Anthony examined the batteries carefully; there was no sign of the wrapper around the batteries peeling off, nor were there any marks on the batteries, or any small acid spill that had corroded part way through them.

There was however one obvious thing that stood out to Anthony, and the more he tried not to look at it, the more it stared back at him; the barcode on the left battery. He read it again, checking that what he had previously seen had not just been a dream. 1918 1918. This was just coincidence, Anthony thought, millions of batteries are made every day, anyone could have had that one, there's nothing that made him any more different from the next man, and besides, it would take more than a few batteries and a dodgy computer to persuade him that there was any such thing as supernatural. He checked the other battery. 5TOP 5TOP 5TOP. Right, this was strange, Anthony thought to himself before carefully discarding the batteries out the window. He checked the time; it was 18:34, so he went down stairs to have dinner.

"So, what have you been doing all afternoon?" asked Anthony's mother in a mocking voice, with two batteries firmly placed in her left hand. Anthony cringed and hung his head down. "Are you alright Ant, you come home from school and hardly say a word, and you look awfully pale."

"I'm fine mum." Anthony replied, scowling at the suggestion that something was wrong with him.

"Come on; own up Anthony, what's eating you?"

"Erm, my dinner." Anthony retorted, unaware of what the initial question was.

He hurriedly finished his dinner and went back up to his bedroom, there had to be an explanation for all this, he thought, going back on his word that it was all just coincidence. These things are always resolved on TV shows; there's always a logical reason behind what had happened. But that was just it, nothing had had happened, yet. If there was any logic behind the situation then it would mean that something would happen that evening, at eighteen minutes past seven, that's what the timer was leading to, that's what the internet suggested and that's what the batteries had said; trying to come up with reasoning behind it at this point was stupid. He just had to wait, another... Anthony calculated in his mind, 51 tantalizing minutes. There was nothing he could do to pass the time. Turning on the television or computer would only remind him of his future fate, and he was scared that if he did anything else that included any effort, he might once again be visited by the 1918 STOP curse; maybe he would find that his football would need to be pumped up using a 1.918mm pump, or his iPod would just stop exactly at 19 minutes and 18 seconds after being turned on.

So he just sat, and sat, and sat, watching the minutes pass in the corner of his bedroom, throwing a bouncy ball against the wall again, and again, and again, with his eyes focused on his surroundings, making sure no ghosts would appear at the door,

or that a grim reaper wouldn't emerge and offer him £19.18 for his soul. It was entirely unbelievable, but at that moment in time it had as much chance of happening as a battery having a barcode identical to the bizarre messages on his computer and television.

With just 22 minutes left before Anthony's fate would supposedly be revealed, he reached the morbid conclusion that he would much rather die in his sleep than whilst he was awake anyway, and so he climbed into bed.

The shock of the day's events had made him feel drowsy but there was no chance that he would fall asleep anytime soon, as his mind was still brimming with curiosity.

He looked up at the clock, the big hand pointed firmly at the seven, whilst the small hand was winding it's was round to reach seventeen minutes past. One minute left, Anthony thought. Would he be dead within the next minute? Would three ghosts appear like something out of '*A Christmas Carol*'? Would it all just be a figment of his imagination? Would everything just stay the same? He continued contemplating his future up until the little hand closed in on the last fractions of space between itself and the eighteenth minute mark on the clock face. This was it.

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If I was now to tell you that nothing happened, you would probably feel let down and disappointed that you've spent minutes of your time reading through a story with no ending. But the reality is that nothing did happen, and while you may have felt like you've wasted your time on this story, Anthony Smith had no time to waste. Literally.

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The clock had stopped, the hands stiffly frozen, in fact, all the clocks had stopped; the one on the wall, the one next to his television. Was it a power cut? No, it couldn't have been, Anthony thought to himself as he saw that the light on his computer connected to the mains was still on. He forced himself out of bed and towards the light switch to test whether it still worked, but there was a problem; it was as if someone had entered his room unnoticed and glued the switch down, so that no matter how much power Anthony exerted onto it, it simply would not move. Anthony's fear had been masked by his inquisitiveness and so he walked to the door and wrapped his fingers around the handle in order to go and explore, but once again there was no possible action that could have opened the door and let Anthony free to roam.

It was as if the oldest and most relied upon concept in the world had halted its perpetual motion and only Anthony Smith, just one speck of dust in a world of over six billion people had seen it coming. Or had he? Did everyone else foresee the events? And unlike Anthony, did they have the inclination and knowledge of hindsight to act upon what they saw? There was only way to find out; he had to find an exit.

It was not long before he noticed the open window, and given the extraordinary circumstances that he found himself in he decided to risk the possible 5 meter fall in order for his mind to be put at ease, if that were even possible.

The drainpipe running down the house suddenly gained a new purpose as Anthony hurriedly slid from his window to front garden, ignoring the fragility of the

plastic and what the likely outcome would have been if he had misplaced a hand or foot and plunged into the foliage beneath him.

There was no point dwelling on the past however, as all of Anthony's attention had been focused on something much more startling; people. This wasn't an ordinary scene for an evening in Dim Village however, nor could it be called ordinary for any populated place within the world, as aside from the breathing reflex, not a single muscle of any of the people who Anthony had seen day in day out for years appeared to be in motion. The loops of the robotic mechanisms had finally ceased, leaving Anthony the only animated character within this 21st century Pompeii.

With the rain having worn off completely around half an hour before the end of time, Anthony decided upon taking a short trip from his front garden to the high street, where he observed a scene which, for had it not been for the motionlessness, typified life in Dim Village.

There were the teenagers whose disinterest and detachment from the traditional village life had seen them congregate on the street corners, whilst the frail elderly could be seen watching them behind curtains from a far out of fear and their own boredom, ready to accuse if so much as a foot was placed out of line. Then there was the generation in-between, who had been scattered around the area. Some were at the public house, socialising and drinking a range of beverages whilst others were waiting patiently outside the only takeaway within close proximity. The vast majority however were inside their own homes, with the younger people doing school homework or watching television whilst their parents busied themselves with chores such as ironing or cooking.

It was at this point that Anthony realised just how much he appreciated the diversity of his neighbourhood, and how though he had often complained about the mundanity of his own life, he had actually forgotten about all of the things that he has been lucky enough to have, all the people, the buildings and the equipment that others may go without. As he made his way back round the roads and up the drainpipe to his bedroom, Anthony realised the true meaning of the old adage about not appreciating what you do have until it has gone (or in this case, stopped). He had lived his own *Christmas Carol* and the fear and confusion that Anthony had previously experienced was for the first time in several hours put to the back of his mind. As Anthony climbed into his bed with thoughts of appreciation and gratefulness ongoing, he decided that restarting time could wait until he awoke.