

Can you spare a minute?

A short story by
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This story was first published in *Transmission* magazine, Issue 7,
Spring 2007.

Daniel stands at the top of Market Street, just down from the corner; JJB Sports behind him, BHS opposite. This is his pitch; his spot. This is the best place.

He clutches the black plastic clipboard close to his chest and watches the groups of people walk towards and past him. Some see him early and cross the width of the pedestrianised area to avoid him. Some don't see him at all and walk closer, but either way few stop. Undeterred, he offers his call to each one who comes near enough.

"... just a few minutes?..."

"... spare a few minutes?..."

"...can you just?..."

"...a few minutes?...."

"...spare a?..."

"...can you?..."

"...minutes?..."

"...it'll just take a sec."

Some brush past him. They see his shining eager face, his cold fingers creased round the edge of the black plastic clipboard, the other hand reaching out, imploring, and they keep their heads down and walk on.

Some glance at him and then away, quickly, as if he has some kind of disease which could be caught simply by looking at him.

Some look at him long enough for him to catch their eye, but then they smile and shake their heads and keep moving, putting distance between them.

Many others, whether they look up at him or not, utter their own mantra in this traditional call and response, with all the rote dullness and precision of catechism.

"...sorry, no time..."

"...I can't spare any..."

"...no time..."

"...have to be somewhere..."

"...maybe on my way back..."

"...five minutes ago..."

"...can't at the moment..."

"... I haven't got the time to spare."

But every once in a while, one stops. He tilts the clipboard away from his chest and explains what he wants. They give Daniel his few minutes and, he likes to think, they go away feeling better and lighter for doing so. He feels he's doing them a service and each one he is able to help makes the whole thing worthwhile.

Daniel stays at his pitch longer than he should. He stays through rush hour and out the other side. The people on the streets now are a mix of those going home after working late and those heading out for the evening. In either case they have no time for him.

With a shrug of his thin shoulders, he turns and starts to walk away from the bright lights and towards the lesser-travelled parts of town. The buildings he passes now are older, more worn, their facades crumbling and stained. Some of them have their windows boarded up, but as he walks more and more of them are bricked up, revenants of the window tax. Mist gathers and the tarmac becomes broken under his feet, rough cobbles emerging from under. The sound of the city dies at his back and the clump and thud of his boots on the ground becomes more noticeable. The streetlights soften and start to hiss. A horse goes past pulling a coach as Daniel turns into a

narrow alley between two warehouses. He walks its length to the small wooden door at the far end. Candle-light glows from the window as he grasps the handle and presses the catch. The door opens with a soft creak and the smoke from the woodstove billows out past his face, carrying with it the smell of watery stew.

Daniel steps into the room and closes the door, he turns and places his the wooden board he's carrying onto the worn table. An old woman, his mother, stands at the stove and stirs a large pot. She looks over and smiles at him, pleased to see him home. He smiles back and raises his eyebrows in a question. She shakes her head and goes back to her stirring.

Turning his attention to the room's other occupant, Daniel steps forward to see him better in the firelight. His father's bed, nothing more than a wooden pallet with a rag-stuffed mattress, was moved downstairs when he grew ill, to bring him nearer the warmth of the fire. He lies, propped up in the bed, wearing all the clothes he owns, most of them reduced to rags themselves. His gaunt face peers out from atop this mass, old and lined, but smiling and expectant.

"Danny, lad. You're back. Did you get me some?"

Daniel nods. "Yes, Dad. I did. "

His father licks his lips and some saliva dribbles down through the cracked flesh of his lips. Daniel feels vaguely disgusted for a moment, but then realises that he can see the wall through the edges of his father's face, ragged edges where he is starting to fade, and the feeling is replaced by one of urgency. He pushes his hands into his pockets and brings them out again, full. He opens them and shimmering jewels fall slowly onto the table top like insubstantial glass snowflakes.

He gestures to them. "It's the usual kind of thing, Dad."

He picks one up and gazes into it. It looks like a large diamond, but compresses between his fingers like jelly. In its heart there is a shimmer, which resolves into images of a man sitting at a desk, waiting.

"A couple of minutes waiting for a computer to boot up."

He drops this one and picks up another containing a woman in a coat. "Just over six minutes waiting for a bus."

A third, a man standing, staring into space. "The photocopier needed to warm up. Nearly a minute."

He drops the three fragments of time and looks back up at his father. "The usual. Nearly six hours in all." He picks up another, this one much larger than the others. "This was a three hour exam."

"Only six?..." His mother has turned from the stove, her face fallen.

"Only?" says his father. "It'll do me, and it doesn't matter what kind of time you've got, son. It's all the same to those of us who need it. And wasted minutes can feel like years." He reaches up to the table and grabs a handful of the jewels. He squeezes them between his fingers and the light in the heart of each bursts and flows over his hand like water from a sponge. Slowly, the light fades as it soaks into his skin; skin which is now a little younger, a little firmer, a little more *there*.

Daniel looks around the room and sees the candles have been replaced with gas lamps, the window has thick curtains to keep out the cold, and his father's bed now has an iron frame with a proper mattress.

His father takes the second handful and squeezes them. The lamps become electric bulbs, the bed a floral divan on thick plastic legs. The pot his mother is still stirring is sitting on the electric ring of a cooker. She looks around, still trying to keep the disappointment from her face.

"Nineteen sixty or so, I'd say," his father comments. "Not bad at all." He looks up at Daniel. "But we'll still need more tomorrow."

Daniel nods, but then can't hold it any more and breaks into a smile.

"What?" his father asks.

"Maybe not," Daniel replies. Struggling to hold his excitement he reaches into his inside pocket and brings out a jewel the size of a cricket ball.

His mother, having turned at the sound of Daniel's excited voice, gasps. "That looks like..."

Daniel nods. "It's a whole day."

His father reaches out a hand towards it, but pulls back, almost afraid to touch it. "How...?" he asks.

"A woman gave it to me. It was a day not of wasted time, but a day she no longer wanted. It was a day of sharing, a day of wonder. A day of beauty." Daniel can feel tears catch in the back of his throat. "It was a day of sitting, watching the clouds move over hills, of watching flowers open and turn their heads to follow the sun, a day with a box and a ring. A day of love and laughing and joy." He falters for a moment as he remembers the woman's tale. "But she'd lost the one she shared it with. She no longer wanted it, and when I told her what it would be used for-"

"You told her the truth?" his father asks.

"Yes. I told her about you and us and -" he gestures round the room, "- all this. And she gave it to us with her blessing. It was such a beautiful day that with her loss, it brings her nothing but pain and suffering. The thought that it could bring us as much joy as it used to bring her, was all she wanted to know. She gave it willingly and left with a smile on her face and a weight removed from her heart."

His father looks up from his bed with tears in the corners of his eyes. "You know what this means, don't you, son?"

"Yes, dad. I do. It means we can finally go home."

Daniel presses the giant jewel, coloured with the greenest of grasses and the bluest of skies, into his father's hands and together they squeeze it, feeling it burst between them like an overripe peach, its juices surprisingly warm and soft. The bright light crawls over their fingers, growing brighter, up their arms and out, over their bodies and over the room, covering everything; brighter and brighter until all that remains is light.