

Time Watchers

by Carrie Falck

It was a dark and stormy Halloween Night at the Kwik Trip.

I was working the register until nine o'clock. It was the crap shift. The one right in the middle of trick-or-treating. The one that gets all the last-minute candy buyers panicked when they see we are down to those weird gummy oranges they sold during the Depression, and some early candy canes.

If the Kwik Trip had a porch light, I'd have turned it off.

But, as it actually has eight megawatt, 50-foot post gas station lights, I wasn't getting out of anything.

So, I stayed where I was, ringing people up and fitting in better than usual, if I'm being honest. I like to dye my hair purple. This normally gets loads of unwanted commentary (from people buying things like pig skins and Funyuns; if you buy things that look like chips, but that are actually made from fried pig skin, you should just shut up about everything, FYI). But, on Halloween no one says anything about my appearance.

So sure, Halloween evening shift at the Kwik Trip is a little nuttier than usual. And I'd skip it if I could. But it is a good night to people watch, and I love to people watch.

That's because I am also a Time Watcher.

Or, that's what I've named myself. I had to name myself because I've never met anyone else like me.

What is a Time Watcher?

When I look at someone, I can see how much time they have left before they die.

For me, each person has a clock hanging around their neck. The clocks show exactly how many hours a person has left in this life. Now, no one seems to realize they are wearing a death countdown clock. And I can't see my own. But, I assume I have one (everyone does), even if I can't see it. Perhaps that's for the best.

Afterall, it would be tempting to interfere.

Sometimes, I do interfere.

Let's say someone walks into the K.T. with a clock in the single digits. I might say something like, "Stay in tonight." I figure changing plans might make the difference. If the person seems friendly, I might even mention having a bad feeling. Nothing too Miss Cleo, but...sometimes I see them again at the Kwik Trip, their clock reset, and I know it worked out.

So back to tonight. Halloween night. A mother and her daughter come in. They are both dressed in costume. The mom is dressed as a little kid, and the girl is dressed like a mom. They are so cute, it makes even an old, jaded, high school cashier like myself smile a little.

Until I see the clock.

The little girl's clock is set to: 3.

Three hours. Three hours until this happy little unit is broken.

"I'll be right back," I tell Steve-O, the other lucky guy working this shift on the register. I head over to the girl by the cooler. Thankfully, her mom has turned the corner into the snack aisle.

"Nice costume," I say.

"Thanks. I like yours too," she says back. My purple hair comes through for the W.

“I really love your necklace,” I point with one hand to the string of pink pearls and a Barbie emblem resting just above her (for now) beating heart. “Can I see it?”

I kneel down and grab the necklace and the clock together. I say something about Barbie, but who knows what I’m actually saying. I find the winder for the clock under my thumb. It spins easily under my thick fingers. Each flick of my fingers is a whiz of backwards numbers.

We go on like this for a few minutes. I talk Barbie nonsense, and the girl lets me.

“Kelsey?”

That would be mom. I swear under my breath and the little girl gasps. But I just keep spinning. Each second gives her hours.

“Great costumes,” I mutter thumbing the winder. “I really love this necklace.”

The mom puts her hip into my shoulder, nocking me slightly off balance. I release the necklace and the clock, and catch myself with my hands on the floor.

She takes her daughter by the hand and marches past me. Under her breath, but not quite under enough, she says, “Weirdo.”

I lumber back to my feet. I am sweating, and I’ve blushed at her one mean word. *Yeah. The weirdo just gave your daughter back 28,175 hours.* It wasn’t enough of course. Just a few years. Still. *You’re welcome.*

I hike up my khakis and wander back to Steve-O. He gives me a glare, but I settle back at my register without a word. I’m not explaining myself to him. He’s my trainee, for eff’s sake.

I start to get back into my groove of “Do you have a Kwik Rewards card?” and “Go ahead and tap,” and, “See ya next time.”

A young guy, no costume, plunks down a box of half a dozen glazers.

“I saw you back there, with that little girl.”

I don’t look up. I don’t need this, whatever this is.

“I know you were just trying to be nice. Which is why,” he just keeps going. “I want to tell you,” he leans in. He whispers now, “Three days from now, you might want to lay low. Stay close to home. Just hole up.”

I am look up with a jolt. He is looking at me too. But not at my face. He’s looking at my chest. As if he sees something there, just over my heart.

My entire body has erupted into goosebumps – arms, legs, back of my neck and roots of my hair. My throat is dry. Too dry to say anything back that isn’t a croak.

He takes his glazers. He gives a single nod, like we have an understanding.

He says my words for me. “I just – have a feeling. See ya next time.”