

The Performer

Walking down Silver Street, alone in the dark evening, I turned my head up to look at the clock faces showing on the steeple of the old Congregational Church. Not watching where I was going, it would have been understandable if I'd walked into the man coming towards me. But in the soft stillness of the night air his gentle laughter announced his presence to me as we approached one another.

Lowering my gaze down to sidewalk level, what I saw was an elderly man, perhaps in his mid-sixties, coming towards me on the outside edge of the pavement. Plain pants, pulled up high across his ample belly, a simple knit shirt, worn and tattered tennis shoes, the old fashioned black ones with silver eyelets, and, tucked carefully under his arm, some sort of package, a nondescript shape wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with bailing string. He was looking down as he walked, staring intently at the curb. As I watched his very deliberate stride it became clear to me that he was carefully treading along the narrow curbstone that separated the walkway from the road.

I stopped and stared in fascination as he moved towards me. Each foot placed carefully in front of the other, toes pointed perfectly along the line of the curb, his body never swaying as he came closer and closer. Suddenly, as if out of time he'd glided the intervening distance, he was upon me. Apparently seeing my shoes entering his field of vision, he stopped short with a start, and looked up to find me staring at him.

Peeking into the pools of mirth that were his old eyes, I smiled and, as if cuing him to follow my direction, slowly directed my gaze back up to the ancient church steeple. With a slight laugh, hoping to match the lines worn deep at the corners of his eyes, I asked, "Which clock do you think is right ... or should we take them both to be correct?"

He looked at the two round black clock faces that could be seen from our vantage point, their weathered gilt letters and large iron hands proclaiming to the world that it was, indeed, both nine forty-five as well as two fifteen. Looking back at me, his smile broadened and his eyes twinkled as he responded very quietly, "Does it really matter?"

And with that, he walked away. For a moment or two I watched him as he headed into town, still walking the curbstones and laughing to himself. Turning back to my walk, I'd gone several paces when I stopped and stared back at the old clock faces. Looking at my modern digital watch, it struck me that now I could see three timepieces ... all displaying a different value. And I wondered, if somehow I could see all the watches and clocks in the world at once, together in my vision for a fleeting instance, would I find that each told a different time? And, if I could, and they did, would it make any difference? Would it really matter?

Looking back down the street nowhere in my sight could I find the old man, as far as I could see the curbs were empty, simple stones demarking the spaces allocated for pedestrians and machines. But, as I walked through the remainder of that wonderful night, each time I approached an intersection I could hear his soft laughter just around the corner.

