

## The Veil Woven By Mercy

The digital clock came as a Christmas gift to her mother, intended to be a less abrupt morning alarm than the old clock by her bedside. The old device was a flip display clock that made a clicking sound every minute when a new plastic number would flip over.

“It is a lovely clock,” her mother said to her eldest daughter, Janice, who was the gift-giver on Christmas morning. “Look at all those buttons, I’ll never figure out how to work the thing,” she suggested as she examined the unopened box. “My clock works fine,” she said almost to herself as she put the device under her chair with the other freshly opened gifts.

“Except it doesn’t keep time and makes more noise than a locomotive,” Janice observed. “It has a snooze button for the alarm and changes itself to daylight saving time and then back to standard time without you having to do a thing. And Mom, if you ever get a smartphone, it will display reminders from your phone,” she concluded.

“Oh, maybe we can put it on your father’s side of the bed,” she replied with a smile and patted the back of her husband’s hand.

After Christmas dinner, Janice said to her mother, “Mom, if you don’t like the clock, I’ll return it.

“No, you don’t need to do that. I’m sure we will find a place for it,” her mother replied.

About that time, daughter number two, Sandra, walked by and recognized the slight tension in the conversation. “I’ll take it,” she announced. “I need a bedside clock.”

“Great,” said Janice. “And, Merry Christmas, Sis,” she added. Mom smiled as her two daughters hugged.

Sandra Kelly worked in IT at Nordstrom’s New York store and had returned home to Seattle for Christmas. Her apartment in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York was still a work in progress, as was much of her new life in the city. The transition from a Seattle suburb to Manhattan and a new job for the company she had worked for in the Seattle flagship store was exciting and challenging. The two weeks of vacation to see family and visit friends was a welcome respite.

The new clock sat unopened for several weeks after she returned to New York. One weekend in February, she finally got around to removing the device from the box and placing it on a bedside table. Just as the instructions promised, the clock immediately displayed the correct Eastern standard time after connecting itself to the internet. It also displayed the date, current weather, and temperature.

Since moving to Manhattan, Sandra had not become accustomed to the background noise in the city that does not sleep. She disliked using her smartphone as an alarm clock because even with the phone on vibrate, there were enough incoming messages and notifications to disrupt

sleep. She put the phone charger and other digital devices in the kitchen and started using the new clock as her alarm.

The second Saturday of March was a day she could do some IT work from home and run errands that never seemed to get done during the week. Friends from work had invited her to join them for dinner at an Irish Pub in the Village. She had formed a friendly relationship with a co-worker, John Clifton, and had been out to coffee with him a few times. They both understood that since they worked in the same department, a more involved relationship was not good for their careers. A few text messages and polite smiles at work were the outer limits for them at present.

John was at the Pub when Sandra arrived, and she sat across the table from him most of the evening. After a dinner of Irish Sheppard's Pie and a few wee drams, the group of friends called it a night. John asked if Sandra would care to share a cab ride home, but she declined and summoned an Uber on her phone.

As Sandra stepped out of the Uber in front of her building, the driver said, "Remember to turn your clock ahead one hour." And she did.

The next morning, she reflexively reached for the snooze button as the 6:30 alarm sounded, then pulled the blankets up around her ears. She let her mind wander, thinking about maybe going to church and then the bakery for a latte. It did not yet occur to her that the clock alarm was programmed only on weekdays. Fifteen minutes later, the alarm sounded again. This time she looked at the display on the clock as she turned off the alarm; it read "Wednesday, March 18."

Wait, what day is it? she thought after another glance at the green numbers on the clock. Was it a workday, and what about that date? March 18 was the day after St. Patrick's Day; she never missed St. Patrick's Day! Sandra laid back, rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, and thought about last night. She recalled setting the clock ahead one hour, so it was really 5:30, which was a minor issue compared to the time between now and whatever day it was when daylight savings started.

The first thought as her feet hit the floor was turning on the coffee maker and checking her iPad for emails and notices. After turning on the coffee, she went to the bathroom and then to the sink to wash her hands. Something didn't feel right, but the light reflecting off the diamond ring on her left hand convinced her that more than feelings were involved. She stared at the gold object that encircled her wet ring finger. Slowly she picked up a towel with her right hand and dried the hand that supported the small shiny stone that she had never seen before in her life.

She looked at herself in the mirror to see if there were other surprises yet unobserved. Except for the intruder on her finger, all else appeared normal. They shouldn't allow the first day of Spring to be so close to St. Patrick's Day, she complained to the person in the mirror who stood

there with a towel wrapped around her left hand. She considered events of the night before when the sound of the coffee maker brought her back to the present.

After a cup of coffee, she decided to call the office and announce that she was working from home. During the second cup of coffee, while ignoring the ring, she noticed emails that made no sense to her, all dated last week. The senders were not the usual co-workers and technology people discussing familiar projects. She went to her closet and started going through her clothes, searching for more clues about last night. In the pocket of a notch collar blue blazer, she found a cocktail napkin from an upscale restaurant on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue she had never been to before. She held the napkin and was almost afraid to find other mysteries among her clothing.

When the workday began, she called the IT department, and the receptionist answered after a couple of rings. "Oh, Sandra, you must have this number on speed dial and forgot to put in your new phone number," she said before Sandra could tell her the reason for her call. "Here, let me transfer you to Design," she said before Sandra could ask any questions. "And congratulations," she said as she transferred the call.

"Design, may I help you?" the person said who answered the phone in the Design Department.

"Um, yes, this is Sandra Kelley, and I was transferred to . . ." and she was interrupted.

"Oh yes, Sandra, I bet you are excited. We are all happy for you. Are you calling for your voicemails? I'll connect you now if you want," the woman said hurriedly.

"Yes, thanks," Sandra replied, not knowing what to say next. "Um, put me in voicemail. I'm thinking I will work from home."

"Of course you are," the woman said with a giggle and transferred the phone call to voicemail.

"This is Sandra Kelly in Design," the message announced. "I'm sorry I cannot take your call right now, please leave a message after the beep, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible, or you can send me an email at [s.kelly@design.nordstrom.com](mailto:s.kelly@design.nordstrom.com)." Sandra hung up on herself at the sound of the beep.

As she sat in the only chair in the small kitchen, Sandra realized she did not even listen to her voicemails. Or were they her voicemails? It was her voice on the recording, and the email address was in the correct Nordstrom format, so it was hers, but it was in the wrong department. And what is with the congratulations from people she hardly knew? They knew something she didn't know, and it had to involve the ring on her left hand.

Realizing the trespasser could be removed, she pulled the ring off her finger. Turning the thing in her hand, looking for an inscription or any sign of ownership, she concluded it was an engagement ring. Her mission was to investigate why it was on her finger and return it to the original owner.

“For Immediate Release,” read the heading on the memo dated last week. “Nordstrom is pleased to announce that Sandra Kelly, assistant-manager of our IT Department, has been promoted to manager of the Design Department effective immediately. Ms. Kelly will be responsible for web design and manager of outside support resources in the New York Metropolitan area. As more customers turn to online shopping, Nordstrom will continue to serve the market and our growing customer base,” the press release advised.

The press release explained her transfer to Design, which somebody in HR disguised as a promotion. Sandra continued to search the company website for more press releases and internal memos for information concerning a promotion she knew nothing about.

She realized there might be messages and voicemails on her iPhone that could give her more clues about the missing week and a half of her life. The cell phone recognized her face when she lifted it from the charger, which may have been the first sign of normalcy that morning. The device displayed red notifications of both text and phone messages waiting for her. Then she noticed the date and time were not displayed on the face of the phone. She touched the calendar icon, and nothing happened. It was time for another cup of coffee, maybe with Bayley’s Irish Cream.

“Sis, call me ASAP. Mom is sick. I love you,” the voicemail reported. The message was dated March 17, just after three in the afternoon. Sandra did not recall the phone vibrating.

“What is going on?” Sandra asked when her sister answered the phone. It was six in the morning Seattle time, but she knew her sister would be up. “I just got your message, tell me about Mom,” she demanded.

“Sandra, I’m sorry to disturb you, but Mom is in the hospital and tested positive for coronavirus on Monday,” she explained.

“What hospital?”

“Evergreen Hospital in Kirkland, and she cannot have visitors,” she replied. “And don’t send flowers; they won’t let them in the ICU.” Both women were crying as they talked.

“Oh, my God. How did she get it, or does that even matter? And how is Dad?” Sandra asked between sobs.

“Dad is fine, but they have not tested him because he doesn’t have symptoms,” she said. “We think Mom came into contact at a choir rehearsal because other members are now showing the same symptoms.”

“I can’t believe this,” Sandra said as she walked around her apartment. “When was the rehearsal?”

Sandra could hear her sister turning pages of something and assumed it was the calendar she kept in her kitchen. "Thursday night of last week. I was going to go with her, but I needed to help kids with homework."

Sandra kept walking around as she talked on the phone, and as she entered her bedroom, the clock display was flashing the date. She sat on the bed and looked at the text, which quickly was alternating the dates of "March 18" and "March 9."

"Janice, is there anything I can do? Does everybody else in the family know about Mom?" she asked as she watched the clock.

"Yes, I called Mom's sister, and I called our brother. They all know."

Sandra paused as the clock flashed alternating displays of the date. "Sis, where did you get this clock?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"The clock you gave Mom for Christmas. Where did you buy it? Sandra asked.

"That's right; you have it now. I got it on eBay last year. I liked the looks of it, and Mom needed to replace that old clock radio. Why do you ask?"

"It just seems to have a mind of its own. Where on eBay?"

"At one of those eBay stores. I have bought from them before. I think they are a reseller and have great prices. I've returned things to them, and they are pretty good about refunds," she advised. "Do you want me to send it back?"

"I don't know yet," Sandra said. "I threw away the box, and they might not take it back. Do you know where it was made?"

"Now that you ask, I remember the listing on eBay said it was made in Mexico, but I saw text on the box that caused me to think it was made in Asia. Listen, if it is a problem, send it to me, and I'll deal with eBay."

"No, there are more important things to deal with right now," Sandra said to change the subject. "Can Mom receive a phone call?"

Her sister explained that a phone call probably would not work, but to call Dad at home and let him get a message to Mom.

After hanging up, Sandra continued to watch the clock as it flashed alternate dates. She picked it up and looked for information about the manufacture, and anything she had ignored when she set it on the bedside table. There was nothing to be found, not even a UL Certification insignia. She looked in the top drawer of the bedside table for the instructions, which seemed a logical place to put them.

The three pages of instructions were in multiple languages with the usual warnings for electrical devices. Sandra read the instructions and realized that she had turned the clock ahead one hour before she went to bed last night, or what she considered to be last night. The instructions advised that the clock automatically reset itself for daylight savings time and readjusted back when it ended. Then at the bottom of the English language page, written in all capital letters was the following statement:

“THE VEIL THAT SHIELDS OUR EYES FROM THE FUTURE IS WOVEN BY THE HAND OF MERCY.”

Sandra looked up and stared out the bedroom window at the street in front of her building. Was she living in the future? Was she living in her future, or somebody else’s future? It was not a future she wanted for herself. If this was the future, could she go back? If she went back, could she do something to prevent this version of the future? She walked around the apartment and considered her options. Was the clock capable of sending her into the future? What would have happened if she had not set the clock ahead and let it reset itself to daylight savings time?

There was not much to lose in trying to go back to the Sunday after daylight savings time started. She apparently was engaged to be married to somebody she had no intention of marrying, and her mother was in ICU with coronavirus. She would destroy the clock. No, maybe just unplugging the thing was sufficient, she concluded. After one last look at her iPad and found it had the same lack of information as her phone, she walked to the bedside table, picked up the clock and pulled the electrical cord out of the wall outlet. She walked to the kitchen, put the disarmed clock in the garbage, and looked at her iPhone — it now displayed March 9 and the correct time. She compared that with her iPad, which also now allowed her access to the calendar. The app for the New York Times opened to the Sunday edition when she touched the NYT icon.

Sandra went to favorites on the phone function, tapped the “Mom & Dad” listing and listened as the landline phone in Seattle rang. It was a glorious sound. Her father answered, “Hello,” and Sandra almost started to cry again.

“Dad, its Sandra, how are you?”

“Great, good to hear from you. How are things in New York?” he asked. As they chatted casually, her father said, “Oh, here comes your mother, she wants to say hello,” and handed the phone to his wife.

“Sandra, how are you?”

“I’m great Mom, and I love you. I just wanted to say hello, and to see if you remembered to set your clock ahead one hour.” Mom affirmed the clocks had been changed.

The mother and daughter talked for a few minutes, and then Sandra said, “Mom, do you have choir practice this week? You are still in the choir, aren’t you?”

“Yes, we have practice; I think it will be on Thursday,” her mother responded.

“Don’t go, Mom, please. I know Seattle is experiencing that coronavirus and, it is not a safe thing for you to attend. Will you promise me you won’t go? In fact, stay home until things return to normal.”

“Yes, I’ll stay at home. I’ve been thinking about that anyway. Thanks for being so concerned about your old mother.”

The call ended, and Sandra started crying as she allowed the hand of mercy to shield her view of the future.