

HOURLASS

by Colin D. Smith

It was a split-second decision; I only hope it's one I won't regret.

I was in the store to pick up the daily water ration. Mother would have gone herself, but she didn't think she could carry the gallon all the way home. As the oldest son, it fell to me, what with Father being away looking for work. I passed by the stacked loaves of uncut bread in plastic wrapping and bags of dehydrated fruit and vegetables. At the back of the store stood two large refrigerators with bulky chains and padlocks on the handles. Inside were some bottles of milk, half a dozen cartons of eggs, and a few packages of cheese. My mouth watered just looking at them. The water containers were in the corner, next to the refrigerators, and I could see there were only a couple of gallon containers left. I picked up one, and carried it to the check-out at the front.

"Wadya got there, son?" the lady said as I approached. I showed her the water. "You got ya coupon?" I handed her the water coupon. We get one every week from the Department of Welfare. Since the war, all water has to be decontaminated before drinking; that's why there's such a limited supply. She took out a special pen from her white jacket and marked the coupon. She then gave me a strange sideways look, and beckoned me closer with her finger. I took a couple of tentative steps forward.

"You wanna win yaself two gallons of water and some meat and dairy?" I frowned at her. Meat and dairy were in shorter supply than water, what with most of the livestock being poisoned by chemicals in the last blitz. "Serious!" she assured me.

"How?" I said, not sure whether to believe her. She put my water coupon in the tray of her cash register, and handed me a square card.

"Leave ya water here," she said, "and take this card to the end of 51st and 9th where you'll see a

big house, and a man in front. Give the card to him and accept the challenge.”

“Challenge?” I said. “But what about our water?”

“You cain’t have both,” she said. “It’s either the challenge and two gallons of water, meat, and dairy for a month, or ya gallon of water.”

“What is this challenge?” I said, looking at the card. It had Horatio’s House written in large block letters along the top, with the address in smaller letters underneath. At the bottom right it said Admit One.

“I know nufink about the challenge,” said the lady. “All I know is we’s to offer these to youngers like you for the chance to do better than a week of water. So, whadya say?”

I looked at the card some more. It was thick and grey colored. You don’t see thick card like this much, so this Horatio must have money, or influence. Perhaps he can afford to live up to the promise? And Mother could do with something better to eat than what our garden has managed to produce, which isn’t much from our meter square of decontaminated soil. No wonder she’s so sickly.

“Alright,” I said at last. “I’ll take it.” The lady smiled.

“That’s a good kid,” she said. Suddenly, her countenance changed. “I forgot to tell ya,” she said. “There’s a forfeit.”

“A forfeit?”

“Yes. If ya don’t complete the challenge, then you lose all, and some.”

“Whadya mean?”

“I dunno,” she said. “That’s all it says on the card. Look on the back.” I flipped the card over, and sure enough, on the back in red letters it said, Prize for completed challenge: 2 gallons of water, and meat and dairy for a month. Forfeit for failure: Loss of all and then some. I felt uncomfortable. If I’m going to take a risk on something, I like to know more definitely what happens if I lose.

“Still interested?” said the checkout lady. We really need the water ration, but the thought of meat

and dairy—and two gallons of water—was too tempting to fight off.

“Yes,” I said, quickly before I changed my mind.

“Very good,” she said, again with her smile. “And good luck to ya!”

I left the store with the card in my hand, heading off toward 51st Street, which is about half a mile away.

Right now, I’m about two blocks from Horace’s House, wondering if I’ve made a big mistake that could cost the family more than I can imagine. We could die without our water ration, and even if we have enough to get by, worse might happen if I fail the challenge. Part of me wants it to be a scam and they’ll give me back our water. But another part of me really wants to do this. For Mother’s sake at least.

The place is hard to miss. It’s an enormous house surrounded by wilting grass and broken slabs of paving. At one time it was painted yellow, but the paint is peeling and dirty. The windows on all three storeys are boarded up, and there are tiles missing from the roof. Our house looks better than this, and we haven’t been able to do any repairs since the war ended five years ago.

A man in a long thick coat approaches me. He’s wearing a cloth hat with ear pads, and has a black goatee and small round glasses that perch on the end of his long thin nose.

“Greetings, young boy,” he says to me, holding out a white gloved hand. I assume he wants to shake hands, but he pushes my hand away when I offer it. He shakes his outstretched hand. “You have a card?”

“Oh,” I say, and put the card into his hand. He lifts it up to his glasses and peers at it against the fading sunlight.

“This looks in order,” he says. “You understand the rules?”

“I think so,” I say. “I perform the challenge, and if I win I get the goods, and if I lose, I forfeit stuff.”

“That is generally the idea. What is your name, boy?”

“Harrison Kinley,” I say.

“And how old are you?”

“I’m sixteen. Is that old enough?”

“Oh, quite. Are you sure you want to do this, Mr. Kinley?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you foolish enough to perform a challenge at great risk, when you know neither the challenge nor the risk?”

“I—er... I...” It’s true. Not once have I even thought to ask him what kind of danger I’m putting myself into.

“Let me explain,” says the man, who I presume to be Horatio. “You will see on the table behind me an hourglass.” He moves to the side and I can see the large hourglass sitting on a rather spindly table that seems unsuited to hold the weight of such a large object. “When I say ‘go,’” he continues, not waiting for my response, “I will turn the hourglass. At that point, you have half an hour, that’s thirty minutes, to enter into the house from this side, and exit out of the house on the other.”

The house is large, but even so, it doesn’t look as if it would take more than five minutes to walk from the front door through to the back. I feel quite hopeful, and excited at the prospect of the bounty I’ll be bringing home.

“If you succeed,” Horatio continues, “then you will receive the prizes indicated on the card. But should you fail, you will forfeit your life.”

“My life? Do you mean to kill me?” Cold-blooded murder happens too often as it is, and I’ve managed to avoid it so far. That this man would threaten my life like this so brazenly shocks me.

“I may not have to,” Horatio says. “But let me clarify,” he continues before I can speak again.

“Should you fail, you will be taken to work at the government’s pleasure.”

This is almost worse than death. I’ve known people that have been taken “to the mines” as they say. They don’t mean coal mines or gold mines; it’s just a way of saying they are taken away to do all kinds of work for the government for no pay. Jobs like clearing minefields, testing for contaminated water, and digging graves for those who have been overcome by diseases we can’t cure. I’ve yet to meet someone who has survived “the mines.”

“But—but how will my family survive if I fail? My Mother needs me,” I say.

“Then either don’t do the challenge, or don’t fail.”

“Can I get my card back?”

“Sorry,” Horatio says, his eyes gleaming, “no refunds.”

So, either I do the challenge, or go home empty-handed.

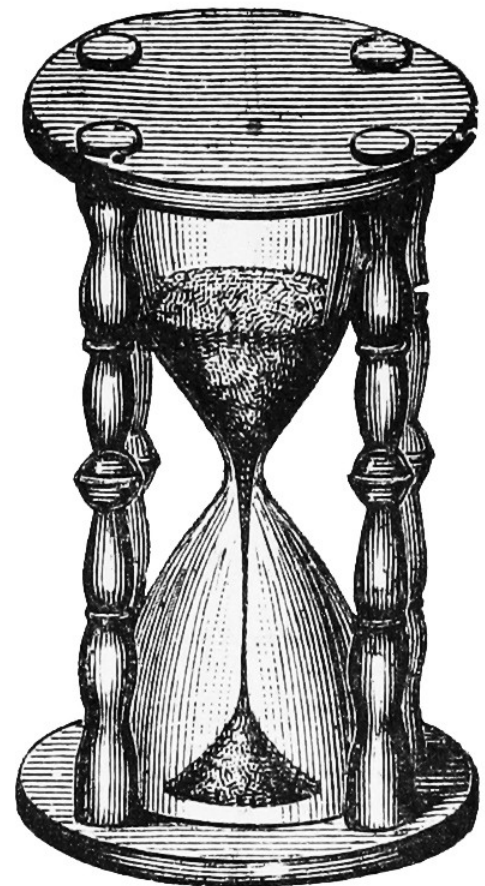
This doesn’t feel right. It shouldn’t be legal. But “legal” has become a very flexible term over the last few years.

“What’s it to be then, Mr. Kinley? Are you in?”

I feel like I have no choice. Why did I have to let my greed get the better of me? Even if I wasn’t thinking of myself, at least a gallon of water will help Mother better than no water.

“I’m in,” I say with a sigh.

“Excellent,” Horatio says, rubbing his gloved hands. He takes my arm and moves me to the front of the house, in front of the cracked stone steps leading up to the door. “Now, you stand there,” he says, walking over to the hourglass on the table. “When I say ‘go,’ run into the house. I will be waiting for you on the other side with the hourglass.”



I ready myself to sprint up the steps to the door.

“Ready...” I glance over. Horatio has a hand on the side of the hourglass. I only just now notice there are handles for turning it over.

“Set...” My heart is pounding and my legs feel weak. Now’s not the time for weakness. I need strength and energy. I need—

‘GO!’

My legs take off before I can think about running. I scramble up the steps and stop just short of hitting the worn front door. I grip the brass door handle and push. It’s either locked or stuck. Thinking the best, I try again, this time putting my shoulder to it. It doesn’t give, not even a fraction. I try pulling on it, in case there’s some kind of trick to it, but that doesn’t work either. Great. My family is going to starve to death because I’m spending half an hour trying to open a stupid door.

I’m about to despair when a thought occurs to me. I straighten my jacket and rap my knuckles on the door three times. After all, you don’t just go charging into someone’s house, do you? Unless you work for the government, anyway. I can hear something clicking inside. The door handle turns, and the door swings inward, inviting me in. I want to be cautious, but I’m up against the hourglass, so I hurry over the threshold.

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I’m barely past the door when it slams shut behind me. I turn, expecting to see my host, but there’s no-one there. How did the door open and close without someone there to do it? I’m curious, but I’ve wasted enough time already.

Thankfully, the house is well lit, and I can see a door straight ahead of me, on the opposite end of a long hallway. There’s a door on the right at that end of the hall, and one opposite it on the left. Towering over the doorway on the left is a large staircase. The fastest way to the other side of the house would seem

to be through that door opposite, so I start running. It's very quiet in here; no sound but the thud of my feet on the soft pink coral carpet.

I'm barely half way across when all the lights go out. With no sense of how far I've yet to run, I have to stop, or I might smack myself unconscious into the door. There's not a glimmer of light anywhere. Not a spotlight or a shadow cast. I can't see my hand in front of my eyes. The darkness amplifies the silence.

I can feel my heart starting to race, and my lungs are pulling air in to keep up. I'm trying not to panic, but it's hard when you're in a strange house, it's darker than night, and you have less than thirty minutes to get out.

I walk as quickly as I dare, with one hand outstretched, feeling for the door. As I walk, a sudden chill passes over me. In an instant I go from comfortable to freezing and back to comfortable, as if I just walked under jet of icy air; but there's still no noise. And I don't recall any pipes or vents in the ceiling. Of course, I may have just missed them. But then there's the silence.

My hand touches wood, and I move it around the surface of the door until it finds the door handle. I twist and turn, pull and push, but I can tell it's locked. I try knocking on the door—it worked before—only this time there's no response. Time's moving quickly through that hourglass, so I need to do something. I feel my way along the back wall until I come to the door on the right. It too is locked, and there's no response to my knocking. I move back toward the left door, a little quicker as my confidence in my surroundings increases. That door's also locked, and no-one appears to want to let me in.

My heart is pounding now, and I have to try to control my breathing which seems very loud in this dreadful silence. I strain my ears, but I can't even hear any noise filtering through from outside. I feel trapped. Sealed in with no way to escape. I lean against the back wall, blinking water from my eyes, trying to think. The stairs. Perhaps there's a way to the opposite side of the house by the stairs. If I have to jump

out the window to be at the opposite side in thirty minutes, I would gladly suffer the fractures for the end reward.

I head back toward the front door, feeling the air in front of me with my left hand to be sure there aren't any obstacles in my path. When I think I'm close to the end, I veer toward the right and hold out my right hand. Soon the staircase brushes my fingertips, and I am able to find my way to the bottom of the stairs and start walking up.

I hold the handrail as I take each step. My feet sound heavy on the carpeted stairs. There is still no other noise except for my footfall. As I climb higher, the atmosphere changes. The air is somehow denser, and warmer. It feels as if I'm walking into a room, but the steps continue up.

The sound of my footstep changes. It feels like I'm treading in something. I take my next step a little slower, moving my foot and finding it slide more freely than on plain carpet. There's something on the stairs, and I'm stepping into it. It feels like sand.

And then something wet hits my nose. My cheeks. My head. My hands. I hold out my hand then put it to my mouth. There's no taste. My feet are sinking deeper with each step.

I reach down and scoop up whatever it is that is on the stairs. It's cold to the touch, wet, and slushy. Snow? But it's too warm up here to have snow. And yet it can't be anything else.

By now the snow is up to my ankles. Surely I must be near the top of the stairs? Suddenly, a hazy blue glow lights up the tops of the walls. I can now just about see where I am. The last few snow-covered steps are ahead of me. The way the light reflects off the snow reminds me of winter nights, walking home from trying to earn food in town. The garden doesn't produce much under six inches of snow, so winters are particularly difficult. These aren't fond memories.

I reach the top of the stairs, expecting to push my foot into a mound of snow, but the floor is clear. I look behind me; there's nothing on the stairs except for carpet. Was that all in my mind? Did I

imagine that snow? I touch my head; my hair is dry, as is my jacket.

In front of me is a large hallway stretching out to the left and the right. Instinctively I turn right and start walking quickly. Even by this hazy blue light I can pick up the pace and walk quickly. The hourglass must already be half full, so I must hurry. I look around for doors, windows, anything to help me get to the back of the house.

Again, I pass through a jet of cold air. I look up, but there is no vent, and no pipe. And it's gone as quickly as it hit. I can feel goosebumps on my arm and a shiver down my back that has nothing to do with that icy blast.

A crash on the opposite end of the hallway stops me in my tracks. I turn, but don't see anything. Part of me wants to find out what it was; another part of me doesn't want to know. I continue walking along the corridor.

Suddenly, a high-pitched scream tears through the silence. I nearly yell in response. I turn expecting to see something horrible, but there's nothing there. The echoes of the piercing shriek linger. Another scream cuts through my nerves, and this time I run in the direction of the noise. As I tear down the hallway, there's another scream, this time it carries on as one long heart-wrenching cry. I'm nearly to the end of the hallway, and there's a t-junction. The noise of the scream is on my left, so I turn that way.

Then the scream changes into a laugh, a loud cackling laugh. I stop dead in my tracks, looking around for the source. I see open doors and bare walls, but there's no-one in sight. My hands are trembling noticeably as I walk along the hallway, peering into the rooms on either side. For the first time since the lights went out, I'm more than scared; I'm petrified.

I just turn back from looking into a bedroom when a large bookcase comes crashing down in front of me, missing me by inches. I jump back as books scatter and wood splinters across the floor.

"That was close," I say to myself, trying to break some of the tension that has my stomach wound

into a knot.

I carefully pick my way over the remains of the bookcase, and continue my search for the source of the laughter, which has by now died into a chuckle that periodically ripples in the air. I see a study through the door on the other side, and while I'm looking, I nearly bump into someone.

"Sorry," I say as they pass by. I catch sight of the long coat, white hair and glasses of the man as he saunters past. No sooner is he behind me than he chuckles that same chuckle that has been filling the silence for the last few minutes. I turn around quickly. He's gone. And all the doors are closed.

There's a crash behind me, in the direction I was walking. That's it. I've had enough. Fear and dread consume me, and I run down the hallway back the way I'd come, past the stairs, until I reach the other end where there's a wooden door barely taller than me. I reach out for it, but it opens on its own, revealing a wooden staircase. I run down the stairs, not caring that each step creaks as I leap from one to the next, sometimes taking two or three at a time, hurling myself around the corners until I get to the bottom. There's another wooden door, and I push it open, not caring where it comes out. I just want to be out of that damnable house.

I come through the door and immediately smell fresh air. It takes me a moment to recover my eyesight. Even shaded by grey clouds, the sunlight is much brighter than the blue light of the house. When my eyes have adjusted, I see that I'm standing outside on a footpath that leads to a small garden. To the side of the path there's grass, and a table. On the table sits the hourglass. I walk up to it, for a closer look. There are still a few grains of sand trickling down onto the pile in the bottom half. I can't help but grin.

"Yes!" I say. Then again, only a lot louder: "Yes!"

I look around for Horatio, but I don't see him. Don't tell me this was all some kind of sick joke after all?

"Horatio?" I call. No reply. "Horatio, where are you? I did it. I completed the challenge. Come out

and give me my prize!”

I walk down the path toward the garden, and see that it’s not a garden. There’s a row of flower beds, and behind each flower bed is a large stone. The largest stone is in the middle. Engraved on the stone are the words:

HORATIO HARELSSON

1872-1941

His last act was his best. May he rest in peace.

No. No... It can’t be... I was deceived. It can’t be... my water? The noises... the bookcase... I feel that tense knot return to my stomach. My breathing is labored. I make my way back up the path to the hourglass, which is now still. All the sand is in the bottom, and there’s a crack in the glass.

Next to the hourglass on the table is a crate of supplies, including two gallons of water, fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, bread, meat, and milk.