

# Closedown – Paul Blake

The ornate clock ticked on the mantle. A regular noise that Neil had long since tuned out. The hands moved backwards as he lay on the couch reading. The minute hand had started moving first, a slow rearward jolt every, unsurprisingly, minute. Soon, it became every half-a-minute and the hour hand joined in too. It silently swept counter-clockwise. The tick became faster too, from tick—pause for a minute—tick, to tick, tick, tick, tick, tic—ttticckkkk. A relentless harsh sound that assaulted Neil's ears. He looked at the clock, a quizzical expression on his face. "What the hell?" he asked no one, as he was alone in the house. Neil put the book on the coffee table and with a grunt, using his arm as support, sat and got up. His navy blue thick fluffy dressing gown open. He tightened the belt hiding the holey Back to the Future t-shirt and jogging bottoms he was wearing. His typical lazy Sunday attire. The clock hands whirred backwards. Neil lifted the clock and opened the battery compartment on the back. He removed the batteries and the ticking sound stopped. He could still hear the quieter humming sound of the hands spinning, but at least that was bearable. Neil looked at his smartwatch on his wrist and saw the time flowing backwards there too. The date on the watch face showed it was now 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1974, then the 22<sup>nd</sup>, then the 21<sup>st</sup>, travelling backwards a day every four seconds or so of normal time. Neil tossed the batteryless clock on the couch and walked to the curtained windows. One of the hands of the clock caught on a pillow and it slowly pushed itself off onto the carpeted floor with a muffled thunk.

Neil opened the curtains expecting to see the reddish-violet twilight summer's sky that had made him close the curtains early because the light from the sun fell directly on his face while he was trying to read. Instead, the view looked like one of those cool hyper-lapse videos as the clouds rushed across the sky over his back garden, the day became night and then day again. A rapid cycling that Neil gawped at, with mouth open, and eyes wide open. Rain battered the windows for a for seconds then a flash of a rainbow appeared over the row of houses opposite, gone in a blink, replaced with blinding sunshine and dazzling moonlight. Dull dark grey skies with low clouds changed into cloudless blues changed into nights that lasted for what seemed like minutes. Snow fell in one clump. From no snow to snow, like someone had dumped a giant bucket of stuff onto the town. Neil watched it melt in seconds. Across the gardens, the houses began to dismantle. Roof tiles disappearing leaving the wooden frame, that soon going as well as the bricks that held the roof in place. The row opposite vanished, leaving trees that cast an ever-changing shadow across Neil's garden. One of the trees was split into two blackened halves that

hung over the trees either side. The trunk looking like the letter 'Y'. The insides of the trunk exposed to elements.

He shifted around looking through the window at an angle to see what had happened to houses next-door. His fence was still there, beyond that was a wood. The trees thriving. Their trunks lifting high into the sky, their canopies thick with leaves, then sparse, then thick again.

Neil looked at his watch again. The days were changing so often now he couldn't distinguish the numbers, the months flipped backwards every couple of seconds. December, November, October. Neil didn't check the year until that too moved. 1932. "How could that be?" He murmured to himself. 1931 now. His parents hadn't even been born yet. His eyes were drawn back to the window as a split-second lightning flash lit up the sky and one of the trees opposite flared in flame that extinguished as soon as it began. Neil watched as the trees shrank steadily. Branches drew inwards, leaves popped up. Green, then gold, then brown, then fall. The trunks thinned and withered. The grass around them grew around them in waves. Neil focused on a fallen tree, massive, but rotted and holed, lying on the ground. Its dark bark peeled and dry. The holes filled. The bark lightened. Neil blinked and the tree was standing tall in the field of grass.

Neil backed away from the window, knocking into the small side table next to the couch, disturbing the television remote control that sat close to the edge. It twisted and span, and fell. Neil didn't notice. He rushed to the front door. His dressing gown caught on the living room's door handle making him stumble into the hallway wall. Knocking down one of the photographs hanging there. The framed picture fell and landed on the carpet face down. Neil reached the front door and twisted the handle while pulling the door open.

The street he had known for the past twelve years was there no longer. The tarmacked and potholed road was replaced by a rutted dirt track that followed the path its younger brother would tread in the future. The terrace of houses opposites had gone, replaced by slim, dark trees that led to a river that paralleled the mud track, the water rushed by, the current pushing it along. It took Neil a moment to realise what looked odd about the water. It was flowing up the slight incline to the top of what had been his street. It looked like a movie played in fast rewind. Beyond the river were more trees that stretched backwards as far as he could see. In his driveway sat his sky-blue Ford Focus, just as he left it two days and what, four-five centuries ago, parked at an oblique angle because he had to drive around an inconsiderate neighbour's car that covered part of the entrance. That car was nowhere to be seen now, of course. The river narrowed and then went as the dirt track disappeared, replaced with more trees, thicker, larger, that dwarfed

Neil's house. Neil looked at his watch, the days and months were a blur, the years going backward so fast he could only see the minus symbol before the number. He felt a chill in the air and looked up from his watch, the sky was dark, the street was a giant block of ice, meltwater splashed onto his drive as it flowed past. His house surrounded.

Neil pulled his dressing-gown closer and stepped onto the path. He walked towards the glacier, watching as it moved backwards, the immense wall of ice, and dirt, and rocks, and trees. He crouched down and put his hand into the meltwater. The sudden cold stung his flesh. He withdrew it quickly and shook the water off. He touched the glacier with his fingertips feeling the massive ice wall move beneath them. It wasn't moving fast, ten-fifteen centimetres a minute. Enough to pull his fingers with it. Tempted to lick the ice, he resisted and pressed his hand against the wall instead. The ice wasn't as smooth as he thought it would be, it had a gritty rough texture. He tried to remove his hand away but it was stuck. He pulled at his hand with his other but it wouldn't budge. The wall started to drag him across his front garden. He kicked at the wall, he yanked, he heaved. It was no use the ice was dragging him closer to the brick wall that divided his front garden and his future neighbours. His shoulder hit the wall first then the rest of him, his arm outstretched, stuck fast. Closer and closer to the edge of the property it moved. Neil screamed in fear, not knowing if his hand would leave the haven of his property boundary and join the outside time. Praying that it wouldn't. So close now. Less than a minute he reckoned. He could feel water trickling down his hand and arm, the trickle became a torrent, soaking him. The torrent a flood. His little finger breached the boundary and started to vanish. One centimetre, then another. Then he was free as the glacier melted away as it receded into future time.

Neil gasped for breath as he huddled against the wall, he cradled his hand in his armpit not wanting to see. He lay there for some time. Sobbing, sodden, and shaking. He felt the warmth of sunshine on his face, interspersed with fractions of a second of coldness, as nights passed by in an instant. He could feel a wet warmth spreading from his armpit, down his side, to his hip. Shit, he thought. He took his hand out from his armpit expecting to see blood spurting from his little finger, like a child's water pistol. To his relief, when he saw the finger it was only dripping. He cupped his other hand under the drip to catch the blood and made his way into the house with haste. Careful not to touch anything, or knock the finger, he went into the kitchen. He held the finger over the sink and turned the cold tap on. Gingerly, he moved the finger next to the water, then plunged it into the deluge. The shock and the pain made his head go fuzzy, brought a ringing to his ears and made him wobble. With his good hand, he held on to the kitchen counter to steady himself. When the feeling passed and the finger was numbed by

the cold water he let go of the counter and gripped the bottom of the finger to stem the blood flow. “That first aid course I took for work as a skive is really paying off now.” He removed the finger from the tap stream, and without looking at the finger, went to the cupboard where his first aid kit was. Using the working fingers from the injured hand he opened the cupboard and took out the small box. He opened the box and removed a small elastic band. He moved back to the sink and let go of the base of the finger, blood started dripping again, mixing with the flowing water, dark red to pink to gone. He picked up the elastic band and stretched it out with his fingers of his good hand. He pushed the little finger through the opening he’d made and moved his little finger in. When the band reached the base of the finger, he released it and it snapped around the finger. The blood drip slowed and then stopped. Neil took an antiseptic wipe from the kit and opened it. Eyes screwed up tight and shoulders braced he dabbed the wipe on the finger. It felt as though he had set light to his own hand. Burning pains racked his arm. He wrapped the wipe around the finger and gently squeezed the liquid out. He threw the wipe into the sink and took out a bandage. Clumsily he wrapped his finger tightly and tore off some tape to secure the strapping. He had no intention of looking to see what damage had been caused.

There was a blinding flash and an immense rumble that sounded like the entire history of thunder wrapped up in one moment. Neil felt the shock inside his body like he had just jumped out of a window and landed on the ground, but everything in the kitchen stayed as normal. The cooking utensils hanging on their rack didn't moment. Nothing fell out of the cupboards on to him, the mugs didn't rattle on their hooks. Then the kitchen went dark, as though someone had turned out the lights at midnight. Neil groped for the light switch. He reached it and flipped the switch. The light came on. He looked through the kitchen window and it was pitch black outside. He went back out to the front garden, keeping close to the house this time. Outside there was the sound of immense wind storms but he couldn't see more than a few feet from the house. He shuffled forward. The automatic sensor on the security light came on. The powerful light only penetrated a little way into the street, but Neil saw nothing. No stars, no dust. He heard nothing either, no wind, no voice booming “Let there be light.” He looked at his watch and the date and time were blank.

END

**Author's note.**

I hope you enjoyed this story, thank you for taking the time to read it.

Twenty-seven of my other short stories can be found in my short story collection A Few Hours After This on Amazon - [mybook.to/FewHoursEbook](https://mybook.to/FewHoursEbook).

