

Chapter One

Arthur Takes a Day Off

Arthur Fibble was an unremarkable man in virtually every respect. In fact, he was so unremarkable, he was practically invisible. He had the uncanny ability to move through a crowded street, a busy office, or a bustling department store without making the slightest impression on anyone. And that was how he lived his life, completely unnoticed.

It was Arthur's habit to get up at precisely the same time every morning and do precisely the same thing every day. In fact, precision was in his blood. You could say it was his middle name had his middle name not been Reginald. His mother had insisted on the name Reginald, after his grandfather who had been an eccentric in a family of eccentrics, so one could imagine what he must have been like. Well, there will be no need to imagine, since we will be meeting him later in this story. But I am getting ahead of myself. It should bear mentioning that Arthur's father was not nearly as fond of the name Reginald as his wife was. He preferred Marrion, after his great aunt, who by the way was also eccentric, so you can imagine how pleased Arthur was that his mother had won that discussion. So, for the rest of his life, Arthur would be known as Arthur Reginald Fibble. Actually, Arthur was not his first name. That was Barton. This leads me to another little known fact about Arthur, one that he has spent a good deal of his life trying to conceal, and which no one seemed to notice until the Christening papers were being filled out. His initials spelled BARF. In as little time as it took for the ink to dry on his birth certificate, the family had all agreed that Arthur it was and Arthur he would remain.

Every morning, Arthur's alarm clock rang at precisely 6:58 am. Well, to be exact, all three alarm clocks rang at precisely 6:58 am, as Arthur had a habit of setting a second alarm clock because he did not fully trust the first. He set the third for the same reason. One would think that Arthur would have had a greater trust in his clocks since he worked for the company that had manufactured them, *The Feinstein, Mueller & Fibble Clock and Watch Company*, but that was not the case. I don't think even Arthur could pinpoint exactly where and when his distrust of clocks originated, but he never really felt assured that they would not let him down.

Once he got up, Arthur would brush his teeth in exactly the same way, get dressed in exactly the same manner, and eat exactly the same breakfast, dry toast with apricot marmalade and a cup of black coffee with precisely two teaspoons of sugar. He used to put three teaspoons of sugar in his coffee, but

as his physician had noticed, Arthur had begun to put on a little weight, three pounds to be exact, so Arthur reduced his sugar intake by one third. This was the only significant change Arthur had made to his daily routine in the last twelve years, the same amount of time he had worked for the company his grandfather had founded. Once his breakfast had been made and eaten, Arthur put on his coat, donned his hat, grabbed his briefcase and umbrella, and descended the three flights of stairs from his apartment, and walked the 27.5 blocks to his office. The walk from his front door to the entrance of *The Diamond Building*, the building in which the head office of the company was located, took precisely 2000 steps. Arthur had looked at several apartments and only settled on the one he currently occupied after trying several different routes to his place of employment. Once he had decided on an efficient route with what he considered to be a proper number of steps, he agreed to the lease. So, every morning he walked the same route, counting his steps silently in his head and arriving at the *Feinstein, Mueller & Fibble Watch & Clock Co.*, the very same company that Arthur's great Grandfather had founded in 1886. The company motto suited Arthur perfectly, "Precision is our name".

Well, if this day was to have begun at exactly the same time and in exactly the same way for Arthur, it would certainly not end that way. His world, at least the one that he had grown accustomed to for the last 42 years, 6 months, 11 days and 54 minutes, was about to come to an abrupt end, at precisely 8:43 am.

The first indication that his day would not go as planned was that his first alarm clock failed to ring, the second had stopped working at some point during the night, and the third ... well, the third had just refused to wake Arthur up. It was as if it had developed a will of its own. Unbeknownst to Mr. Arthur Reginald Fibble, he was about to have an adventure, one that would change his life forever. It would seem his lack of trust in clocks was also confirmed.

Waking up and having realized that he had slept a full thirteen minutes longer than his schedule had allowed for, Arthur sprang out of bed and raced to the bathroom to shower, shave, and brush his teeth, all the while trying to account for the time that each task would take. Realizing that he would have to skip one of these things to make up for lost time, Arthur chose to forgo shaving this morning. He finished his shower, put on his housecoat, and proceeded to dress.

Opening his wardrobe always gave Arthur a sense of satisfaction. It was a marvel of orderliness and efficiency, something that Arthur always aimed for. His shirts were always laundered and crisply ironed. There were five of them, one for each workday, and they hung to the left, while the three suit jackets and five pairs of trousers (all black of course) hung to the right. Five black ties were neatly draped over the tie rod on the inside of the left door. His five undershirts were carefully folded and placed in the cubbyhole marked Undershirts, although Arthur had not added the label, this along with the other labels had been affixed by the manufacturer. The rest of the cubby holes contained the remainder of Arthur's clothing- socks, his unmentionables as his aunt had called them, and his sundries. The manufacturer had the wisdom to affix a label for sundries, a feature for which Arthur was quite appreciative. Otherwise, he would not have known where to put things that did not fall into the other categories.

Because he had slept in this morning, Arthur did not have the luxury of admiring his organizational handiwork, something he did every time he opened his wardrobe. Instead, he quickly put on a clean shirt, socks, a crisp necktie, and his trousers and jacket, in that order, a routine from which he had not deviated his entire adult life, though Arthur could not account for why he did this apart from it

making the most logical sense to him. Although he did make up some time, it was not nearly enough, and Arthur was forced to forgo his coffee and settle for toast before rushing out to work. The lack of shaving and coffee left Arthur unsettled and that is probably the reason why events unfolded in the manner that they did.

The morning had been enough to put Arthur into a bit of a tizzy, a word he had picked up from his great aunt, so he wasn't paying as much attention as he normally did when walking his usual route to work. He realized, as he crossed the third street, that he had failed to count his steps. For a brief moment, Arthur considered returning to his building and beginning the walk again, but dismissed this idea as it would have taken too much time. He would simply have to trust that he took the appropriate number of steps and leave it at that.

Everything seemed to be going wrong for Arthur, so he was not in the best frame of mind as he stepped into the Lobby of The World Diamond Tower, where, as it had been mentioned earlier, the watch company had its head office, though the manufacturing took place elsewhere. Otherwise, he might have noticed the shooting that was in progress in that very lobby at that very moment. Oblivious to the mayhem around him, Arthur calmly walked to the elevator, pressed the call button, and began to wait for the car as shots rang out from entrance to the stairwell. If Arthur was oblivious in that moment, others were not. Screams could be heard from onlookers as a man in a black suit and black overcoat came running towards Arthur in some distress. He apparently was suffering from a bullet wound--though Arthur was only just starting to realize what was happening around him. There was one curious detail that Arthur noticed, and for no apparent reason, struck him, firmly cementing itself into his mind. In addition to the grey suit, the man had a bright red pocket square. It was a bold fashion accessory, considered Arthur, as he could only bring himself to sport a traditional white handkerchief in all the years he had worked for the company. He made a mental note to consider purchasing one sometime in the future, but only if the mood struck him.

As the man ran towards Arthur's, he turned and fired several poorly aimed shots in the direction of the stairwell from which he had fled. Behind him, two men, similarly dressed, but wearing charcoal suits and grey fedoras, fired several shots back at him. It was at this moment that Arthur finally realized what was happening. He was apparently an innocent bystander in the middle of a gunfight. What came over Arthur in that moment, something over which he would ponder in the years to come, was a combination of two emotions that he had never felt before, either separately or in concert: terror and excitement.



You see, Arthur's life had been one of routine, a life of exacting precision. It gave his life meaning, providing a sort of foundation to his day. No matter what happened around him, he could always rely on doing exactly the right thing at exactly the right time. But to be perfectly honest, he had never really done anything of any note in his life, so doing the right thing had never proven very challenging for him. He had come dangerously close to doing something exciting when at the grocery store he had contemplated buying raspberry jam instead of apricot marmalade, but he had stepped back from the brink, saving himself from the abyss. So, when the man in the black suit and red pocket square came running towards Arthur, collapsing into his arms, Arthur just stood there looking down at him, having no idea what he should do. Granted, a few options ran through his mind, but did so with

such speed that he didn't have time to process them, and so he settled on just standing there with the look of complete bewilderment painted across his face.

As Arthur stood there, the man in the black suit bumped into him in a profound panic. "Protect this..." he said as he quickly thrust something into Arthur's coat pocket, though Arthur only discovered the object sometime later. While the events were unfolding around him, Arthur was simply in too much of a state to notice anything.

"Who? Get what?" Arthur asked, still trying to process what was happening around him.

"Constant...." The man's words trailed off as he pushed Arthur away, taking a few more steps before crumpling to the marble floor of the lobby. Something curious failed to occur to Arthur in that very moment, and only came to him much later as he reflected on the day's events. This was a very dramatic way to die. It reminded Arthur of the way gangsters died in the movies he had watched when he was younger. His aunt never approved of those types of films as she felt the narratives were predictable and unpolished. So instead of reflecting, Arthur did the only logical thing he could think of at that moment. He ran.

Arthur ran out of the building onto the street, turned right, and kept on running until he felt he was safely away from any danger. It hadn't occurred to him that he might have been followed, and to be honest, the two men who had chased the man in the black suit, had not bothered with Arthur since he was so nondescript as to be unnoticeable to them. They simply moved past him in the same way that water flows past a rock.

Arthur found himself in an alley, hiding behind a dumpster with his back against the brick wall of the Durham's department store. He was slightly doubled over with his hands on his knees, completely out of breath. You see, despite having walked a total of 2000 steps each way to and from work each day, not including the three flights of stairs in his apartment building, Arthur was in rather poor shape. In fact, this might be the first time he had ever really ran in his life.

As he caught his breath, it dawned on Arthur that going to his office might not be entirely safe, what with the gunfire and all, so he decided his only option was to go home. He would phone into work and tell them what had happened and that he was not feeling well. He would take a sick day, something he had never done before, and pretend that he had never actually witnessed the morning's events. This plan bothered Arthur deeply, as it would ruin his perfect attendance record, not to mention introduce an element of dishonesty into his life, but it could not be helped given his predicament. Arthur could not quite pinpoint why he thought going home was the best course of action, since he had just witnessed a murder and so should provide a statement to the police, but it was the one he took, and this choice may very well have saved more than simply Arthur Reginald Fibble's life. It may have saved everything else.

As he walked home, Arthur realized that he was on a different street, taking a route to which he was unaccustomed. This provided Arthur with no end of consternation. He had never before departed from his regular route home. As a result, Arthur had to get his bearings before he was able to find himself successfully at the entrance of his 10th avenue apartment building.

He stopped in front of a newsboy hawking papers on a streetcorner. The boy, who appeared to be in his late teens, wore a flat tweed cap and was shouting something. "***Israeli Armour Cuts Into Sinai!***"

Read all about it!" Absentmindedly, Arthur reached into his pocket and retrieved a dime, handing it to the vendor. Normally, he would have read the paper at work, but since he had not gone, buying one seemed appropriate, though he was in no shape to read it.

"Thanks, mister," the young man responded, looking past Arthur as he pocketed the coin and handed him the folded paper.

Arthur prided himself on keeping up on current events and the sixties seemed to be a tumultuous decade, so there was no shortage of news to be had. When he was younger, his aunt had insisted that he read the paper every day and then carry on a meaningful conversation about what he had learned. This was to take place during their regular afternoon tea-time, which occurred precisely at 3:00 each weekday. As he unfolded the paper, the headline jumped out at him. It would seem there was yet another war. As he pondered this, he folded the paper and resumed his walk back to his apartment. He was still in a daze as he rounded the corner. Had he been more careful, he would have noticed the leash across the sidewalk, blocking his path.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Fibble. I don't usually see you here at this time of the day," Mrs. Underhill noted with a small air of surprise and a thick southern accent. Mrs. Gladys Underhill lived directly across the hall from Arthur and would take her Pomeranian out for a walk every morning after Arthur had left for work. Never before had she said anything to Arthur beyond a simple "Hello" or "Nice weather," or something of that sort.

Mrs. Underhill was a disarmingly ordinary woman of about fortyish, but it was difficult for Arthur to peg her exact age, as she was slightly overweight, or at least seemed slightly overweight, Arthur couldn't tell for certain as her dress fell loosely about her, reminding him of a parade float one would see outside of Macey's every year. Her hair, it seemed, was permanently in curlers, and covered with a flowered scarf made of either silk or nylon, Arthur could never tell which. When she spoke to Arthur, she squinted through the lenses of her horn-rimmed glasses, carefully secured to her by a gold chain around her neck. She wore what Arthur could only describe as a muumuu made from a garish, floral-patterned print and accented with a pair of bright pink, fuzzy slippers. The only difference in her attire this morning was that she too had a folded copy of the Times under her arm.

"Are you alright? You don't look well," Mrs. Underhill noticed as she squinted through her glasses.

In truth, Arthur neither look well nor felt well. In fact, he was most certainly unwell, beside himself really, a turn of phrase which would have certainly pleased his aunt. That, Mrs. Underhill should have noticed did not seem to have much of an impact on Arthur. It should have.

"Oh, yes. Fine," Arthur responded, not fully realizing that he was standing in Mrs. Underhill's way.

"Well, you don't look at all yourself today. Are you absolutely certain you are well?"

"Yes, absolutely. Thank you."

Mrs. Underhill removed the newspaper, revealing the headline, ***Israeli Armour Cuts Into Sinai***. She sighed. "Korea, Vietnam, and now this. Why can't people just get along?"

Arthur prided himself on keeping up with the news, but he knew very little about this latest conflict.

"I hope you feel better," Mrs. Underhill said with an air of concern.

Arthur nodded, stepped aside to allow her to pass, and went up the three flights of stairs to his apartment. It had never taken him longer to walk those stairs as it had this morning, and as he took each step, he tried desperately to make sense of the morning's events.