



## The Day Time Stood Still

by N. J. Lindquist

### *Prominent Real Estate Agent Feared Drowned*

*June 13, 1989: The car belonging to prominent real estate agent Francis Chapelle was found yesterday afternoon submerged in a lake only a few miles from her summer cottage. Ms Chapelle was reported missing three months ago. It is presumed that she was driving the car when it went off the road. Local residents have for years been calling that particular turn a safety hazard...*

March, 12, 1989

Francis Chapelle maneuvered her Cadillac over the weed-mottled pavement of the circular drive and parked as close as she dared to the front door. Getting out of the car, she paused as if rethinking her intentions. The house looked the way one might expect the set of a Hollywood movie from the forties to look--unused, uninhabited, unwanted. But this particular house, on this quiet street, surrounded by flowing elms and warm-hued maples and new monster homes, was no set.

With a small shake of short blonde waves (gray banished courtesy of her appointment at the hair stylist earlier in the morning), Francis carefully climbed the steps, taking no chances with unruly weeds or rotted wood. The grey, paintless porch seemed sturdy enough. But as she unlocked the front door, she paused again. Was it *really* necessary to go inside?

Resolutely squaring her shoulders under her ivory leather coat, she told herself to stop being foolish. It was another empty house. Nothing more.

She pushed open the heavy door. It needed oiling. She stepped over the threshold into a dim hallway. Boards creaked and she stopped, preparing to turn back. All morning, just the thought of entering the ghostly old house had caused intangible little devils to run up and down her spine.

An acrid stench of stale smoke infused her nostrils. Someone else had been here, then. Not too long ago. She felt inexplicable relief.

She also felt like shaking herself. She wasn't a child entering a neighborhood haunted house. She was a real estate agent, and a good one, too. Twenty-three years ago, bored, her housework and children under control, she

had decided to get a job. They could use some extra cash. Real estate looked easy. She could choose her hours.

The venture proved to be a wise one. At first, there was help to pay the bills. Then the frills began. A cottage. A new house. Good universities for the kids. Finally, after a bit of clawing here, pecking there, she had a leg up into the world of sleek automobiles and well-dressed ladies and gentlemen, the opera this night, a play the next. People bought from her, sold, and bought again. And from her part-time housewife's start, she had grown affluent, now choosing with care properties she deemed worthy of her personal touch, now sending assistants off to take care of the less prestigious, but still valuable, assets. Money was, after all, still money. And she had realized from the beginning that every little bit added up.

Money didn't fully explain her presence here today, even though a great deal was involved. At first glance, one saw only a dreary old mansion neglect had turned into a lifeless, void piece of property. On second glance, one saw the land--fifteen acres of prime real estate--worth millions.

But money hadn't brought her here today. Curiosity had. She knew this house. Its appearance on the market had surprised forgotten memories in her mind. She had come today to shut the lid tightly on those foolish girlhood memories.

But the lid was open now, and as she stood in the front hallway, her mind saw a different house, a house so real she could smell the crisp scent of autumn and hear the voices of the people as they wafted on the air to where she was watching from behind a cascading elm. It was the fall of 1940, and she was watching nineteen-year-old Jamie Brighton go off to fight for freedom.

No one quite believed it. Jamie had joked about becoming a soldier for nearly two years--ever since Hitler had begun his invasions of other countries. But Jamie was always joking. And everyone knew James and Deana Brighton would never allow their only son and sole heir to put himself in danger.

The other reason no one believed it was because Jamie Brighton was the epitome of the handsome, dashing, wealthy young man whom girls and women automatically adore. It was unthinkable that Jamie could be made to lie in a dirty trench with a gun in his hand and mud on his face. No, let other, more ordinary men go to war. Not Jamie Brighton.

But go he did, that sunny fall day. Laughter in his bright blue eyes and assurance on his lips, he stood on the front steps of his ivy-covered home bidding his parents and servants farewell. A few minutes later, he drove off in the chauffeured Bentley.

Fourteen-year-old Francis Winston watched that day, tears streaming from her eyes. Impatiently, not wanting to miss anything, she wiped the wetness away with the bottom of her old pink cardigan. Her sniffs were unladylike, but Francis neither knew nor cared.

As the gardener's daughter, she had frequented the grounds of the Brighton estate. One winter day when she knew the owners were away, she had even sneaked inside the house. Since the only home she had known was the two-room basement apartment she shared with her father, she had been awe-struck by the fairy-land inside.

Later, alone in her shabby home, she had spent hours envisioning those beautiful rooms filled with laughter and gaiety, spilling out onto the lawn and reaching to where she stood, a Cinderella figure in the twilight.

And now Jamie Brighton was going away to fight in a horrible, dirty war.

Not that Jamie had ever spoken more than twenty words to her. Besides being the daughter of one of the gardeners and his social inferior, she was gangly and plain and very shy. So many times before her mirror she rehearsed for the day Jamie would at last notice her and realize she was the girl of his dreams. At those times, words of endearment and intelligent repartee tumbled from her lips. But his genuine presence drove away even common sense, and she stumbled through a simple hello.

And now she might never have a chance to speak to him. He might never know.

Time passed. But not a single night went by that Frannie Winston didn't remember to pray for the safety of Jamie Brighton. Not that she was a devout person. Her father had no time for church. She simply took no chances where Jamie's safety was concerned.

But her prayers went unheeded. In August of 1942, a black wreath appeared on the front door of the Brighton house. The telegram announcing the death of bright-eyed Jamie Brighton at Dieppe sounded the death knell for that beautiful house and everything in it.

A month later Mrs. Brighton died of heart failure. Or a broken heart, as the servants said.

James Brighton closed himself up in his own private hell. Frannie's father and the other servants were fired. Groceries and other necessities were ordered by phone and delivered to the back door, where a cash envelope waited. Only his lawyer saw him, and that once a month to deliver a small sum of money from the mountain of wealth that continued to accumulate.

For forty-five years this continued, until the day when the lawyer, himself now a wizened old man, called the police to open the unresponsive door. Inside was the decomposing body of eighty-seven-year-old James Brighton.

Two years of searching and legal wrangling produced a distant cousin who was adjudged heir. Three days ago, the cousin had arrived. After a cursory glance at the neglected old house, he said, "Sell".

Francis already had a buyer. Soon, the neglected estate would be a host of monster houses with three and four car garages. Soon...but not yet...

Francis drew her coat tightly around her as she took in the cobwebs, dust, and mold in the hallway and formal sitting room. She shuddered at the musty smell of the books in the library and the faded grandeur of the spacious dining room. Then, her jaw firmly clamped and hands grasping the railings and wall, she began to ascend the decaying staircase. At the top of the stairs she turned right and entered the first of eight large bedrooms--once lavish and elegant, known as "the Blue Room", "the Green Room", "the Pink Room", now covered in layers of dust, with satin draperies, lacy coverlets, and rich rugs rotting away. She realized with a start that the house had been left exactly as it was on the day the Brightons had learned their only child was dead. It was as if time had stopped at that moment. Only, of course, time doesn't stop.

She glanced hurriedly at the other bedrooms, then cautiously used the back stairway down to the servants' quarters. She discovered a small bedroom that had evidently been used by James Brighton. There were a few old, worn clothes hanging on three wooden pegs. A scattering of books, a flashlight, a small hand-tooled wallet, and a yellowed paper were on the small night stand which, aside from a single bed and a wooden chair, was the only furniture.

Battling with her conscience, Francis picked up the paper. Curiosity won and she opened it. It was a faded telegram. "We regret to inform you that your son, James Brighton II, has been killed in action...." Words that had marked the end of not one life but three.

Footsteps and a deep male voice with a strong British accent interrupted Francis's thoughts. "Find what you wanted, did you?"

She spun around, mentally forcing herself not to show fear. The man looked about sixty, deeply tanned with white hair and bright blue eyes. He wore a gray shirt, blue jeans, and tennis shoes.

A tramp, she thought. I'll have to send him packing. Her voice was firm. "You'll have to leave here. Now. This house is being sold, and I have a buyer coming."

The man merely looked at her, his head tilted to one side.

Her purse was on a strap around her shoulder. She drew it forward. "Here. I haven't got a lot of money, but I'll give you forty dollars if you'll go right away. If not, I'll call the police."

The man smiled and leaned against the doorway.

Francis felt the already small space of the tiny room closing in on her, making it hard to breath. She was bluffing, and he knew it. If the man were a thief, he would take her purse and her jewelry and...then what?

"What if I don't want to sell?" the man asked carelessly, pushing his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

Francis looked at him, her mouth open. What on earth? She tried to regain control of the situation. "This property is owned by Mr. Brighton's heir, Mr. George Blanchard. He is selling it."

The man raised his eyebrows and grinned. "Don't I get any say at all?"

"Wh--what?"

"I said, don't I get any say?"

"Who are you?"

"James Brighton II."

She held herself rigid. "Jamie Brighton died over forty years ago."

"Well, not exactly." He continued to lean against the door-frame.

"Actually, I traded identities with a poor bloke, pal of mine, who was an orphan. He died in a trench beside me. I was wounded, but I managed to trade our I D's. Rather neat work, considering we were under attack and I only had a minute or so before the medics arrived."

She shook her head, unbelieving, yet amazed at the way he spoke, as though a millionaire's son's switching identities with an orphan was an everyday occurrence. The man must be insane. Then a more likely explanation came to her. He had read the news stories and was a fortune hunter. He hoped to swindle the estate from the rightful heir.

"You know a story like that would have to be proved," she said firmly, placing the telegram back on the table.

"Certainly," he agreed. "I just made tea. Would you care for a cup?"

Without knowing why, she followed him out of the bedroom and into a large kitchen.

It was surprisingly clean. The man must have been here a while. She sat on an old wooden chair on one side of the table, and he sat opposite. Two cups were laid out. So he had seen her come in--had watched her, in fact! She felt indignation rather than fear. After all, she was sixty years old! A thought struck, and she rapidly calculated dates. "How old are you?" she asked abruptly.

His eyes gleamed. "Sixty-five last March."

Of course he would know that. “Who was Elias Winston?” she demanded, and then was annoyed with herself.

“Elias?” His face was still as he sat there, apparently deep in thought. Then he snapped his fingers. “Of course. The gardener. Second gardener, wasn't he? The head gardener was Walt Mordlach. Elias was a tall, thin man. Widower. With a daughter. Her name--don't tell me. Janice? No, Annie. No, that's not right. Frannie! That's it. Just a kid. Used to get all red if anyone spoke to her. Did you know her?”

Of course he knew. He would have checked. She replied coldly, “As you are aware, I am Francis Winston.”

But the amazement in his eyes was genuine. “You? Little Frannie Winston? You certainly don't resemble her, as I remember.” Then he grinned. “I suppose you have proof.”

His audacity amazed her. But her voice remained calm, as if she were speaking to a child. “If I needed it. But it's Francis Chapelle now.”

“Little Frannie Winston, eh? How time alters us.’ He looked embarrassed. “I didn't mean anything by that, you know. But I remember a....well, nothing like you are now.”

“I was poor and plain and shy. Now I'm well-off, well-dressed, and sure of myself. One does grow up.”

“Not me,” he replied cheerfully, and sipped his tea. His eyes twinkled at her, and she knew him. He was perfectly right: he hadn't changed. Oh, yes, he was older, and the black hair was white. But the offhand manner, the charming smile, the casual way of expecting others to agree--all were as they had been forty odd years before.

There was an awkward silence as she realized how many things would have to change.

“Worried about something?” he asked.

“No, no....Just thinking. I can't sell the house now.”

“Not if I don't want to.”

“No.”

“Are you in need of the commission?”

She shook her head. She had not been in need for a long time.

“Have you a family?” he asked.

“Two daughters and a son.”

“Grandchildren?”

“Two so far. There'll be more.”

He nodded, “Yes, of course.”

There was a strained silence as he refilled the tea cups.

“Happy?” he asked.

“Certainly.”

“Husband in business?”

“Yes.” She had to add more. “We're divorced.”

“Oh, I see. Long?”

“Fifteen years. The first year I made more money than he did.”

He nodded, and she had a feeling that he understood.

“You *are* happy then?” he repeated, and she became irritated.

“Certainly. I have what I want.”

“Which is?” he asked, interested, his eyes watching her face.

“Why, enough money, a nice house, friends...that sort of thing.”

“Oh, of course.”

She looked at him. “You had all that.”

He nodded and smiled. “Curious?”

It was her turn to feel embarrassed.

“It's quite simple, really. I was wounded. My left leg was gone. You can't tell now, of course, but the leg is artificial. At that moment in the trench, I just thought I couldn't face coming home like that. Thought it was better for me to be dead. Afterwards, I realized I'd never really been happy here. All the wealth. Parties. Expectations. Not really my thing.”

She stared in disbelief. But all she said was, “Are you happy now?”

“Oh, yes. Most of the time.”

“But your parents. What you did to them--!”

He looked down at his empty cup. “Yes, tragic, that was. But you wouldn't expect me to know they'd take it so hard. Lots of people lost sons in the war and went right on with their own lives.”

“You could have come back later, when you found out.”

“Yes, but I didn't find out! I've lived in Europe. A totally new life. The only reason I heard now is that the cousin of a friend of mine happened to mention my father's death in a letter, and my friend thought the story was curious enough to share. He'd no idea it involved me. Still doesn't know.”

“What will you do?”

“Nothing. I just thought I'd like to see the place again. No need to bring out all the old stuff for the newspapers. I don't want the money. I've enough for my needs.”

“Have you a family?” she asked hesitantly.

“Wife died three years ago. Son and daughter married, like yours. It's a bit lonely since Maggie died.”

Francis nodded.

“Well, if you've a buyer for this place, I should pack up. Wouldn't want to make him nervous. Might think I'm a ghost or something.”

He went into a second small bedroom to pack while she tidied the kitchen. "Can I give you a ride to a hotel?" she called as she hung up the dish towel.

"That would be very nice of you. Are you sure it isn't out of your way too much?" he answered, coming out with a small valise.

"No problem. Are you retired?" she asked.

"Not yet," he smiled. "I run a small bookstore. Going on thirty years now. Of course, Maggie used to do a lot. But I've hired an assistant. College student. Better than no help."

They were at the front door. Each took a last quick glance around, then Francis stepped outside and Jamie Brighton followed.

In the front seat of the Cadillac, he leaned against the plush upholstery and relaxed. "Nice car. No need for one in London, of course, but sometimes I miss going for a drive in the country."

"You could buy one."

He glanced at her and smiled again. "Yes, if I chose. But then I'd have to look after it and find a garage and all that. Too much bother."

She was silenced. No responsibilities. That was it. As a boy, he'd been easy-going, carefree. The injuries had given him an excuse to opt out. The truth was that he didn't want the responsibility of being heir to his father's wealth and businesses. A simple bookstore, where his wife likely did most of the real work, would be right for him. Francis could see it clearly, even though the very idea was completely alien to her well-ordered existence.

As she drove, she used her car phone to book him a room. Twenty minutes later, she stopped in front of a hotel.

"Thanks for the lift," he said as he got out of the car. He reached into the back seat for his valise, paused, then surprised her by getting in and leaning his chin up over the passenger seat. "By the way. I'm going back to England in three days. Seven P.M. flight. British Air. Lonely since Maggie died. Been thinking I could use a wife. Be kind of nice having someone I could talk over old times with. When you start getting old, your mind seems to want to dwell on earlier days. Anyway, you might think about it."

Her eyes were fixed ahead. She said nothing. In her mind, she was thinking, Jamie Brighton is going away again.

He got out and shut the door. She glanced sideways. He was watching her. He waved and smiled.

She drove straight to her favorite restaurant. As was her custom when she was not showing a client around, she ate alone. Her voice when she ordered was clipped and irritable. She could feel one of her migraines coming on.

For the next three days, Francis was very busy. She sold the Brighton estate and tied up the loose ends. She saw clients and lawyers, shopped, sat in her office writing letters and signing papers, went to the theater, ate, slept, and made money. All on schedule.

On Saturday, she made the routine phone calls to her children. Her daughters and son were polite, inviting her to come by. She declined, knowing their lives were already full.

On Sunday, at 6:05 P.M., she entered the airport waiting room. Jamie Brighton sat on a plush tan chair reading a National Geographic magazine. She glanced at him, certain he would never recognize her in the gray wig, glasses, and brown dress. The ticket and passport in her purse were in the name of Lisa Donovan. It had been difficult, but her lawyer had been persuaded by her inside knowledge of a certain land deal he had made, plus a substantial amount of cash.

In a lake ninety miles away, the Cadillac was sitting under ten feet of water. The lake bordered a road where numerous accidents had occurred. The railing put up to warn drivers of the sharp turn would need replacing. Discovery of her car, presumably on the way to her near-by cottage, would not only provide a logical reason for her disappearance but would give the people who were trying to have the road rebuilt lots of good ammunition.

Her purse would be found, of course. There would be no doubt that she had been driving. Her will was up-to-date. She had provided well for her children, grandchildren (including those to come later), ex-husband, and associates. They might think it strange that she had altered her will only a few days before her death, but she couldn't help that. They may even suspect suicide, but that didn't matter. In truth, it was suicide, since the person the world knew as Francis Chapelle would no longer exist. There would be no body of course, but that wouldn't be thought strange. The lake was deep, with lots of weeds and rocks, and strange currents, and even some overhangs. A body could easily go missing.

There would be headlines in the newspaper and a large funeral, and she would be missed for a few weeks, perhaps, but the business of life would see that she was not mourned long. No one would miss her the way the Brighton's had missed Jamie. The way Frannie Winston had missed him.

"First call for passengers traveling on British Air, Flight 704 for London, England. You may board at gate 15."

Francis followed Jamie onto the plane and sat three rows behind him. As the plane taxied down the runway, she wondered what his reaction would be at the end of the flight. Would he be surprised to see her, or would he take her presence for granted? Only time would tell.

She smiled. Time. It had taken a long time. But Jamie had finally realized that he needed her. Just as she'd always dreamed he would. He had reached out and pulled her from her world into his. The fact that his world was changed didn't matter. She didn't need the grandeur of a ballroom. She would dance to a radio amid the bookshelves if necessary. All she needed was the man. She watched him turn to smile at a stewardess, his blue eyes laughing just the way she remembered.

Time had not simply stood still; it had turned back.

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**N. J. Lindquist is the award-winning author of two Manziuk and Ryan mysteries, *Shaded Light* and *Glitter of Diamonds*. [www.njlindquist.com](http://www.njlindquist.com)**

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