

Keeper of the Sun

By

Andrew Armstrong

What I am about to tell you contradicts natural law, but what, after all, is natural law? Just the present limits of our understanding.

I have led a life not much different from others of my generation: raised in a middle class household, I was a diligent if not brilliant student, and pursued a civil service career following graduation. With the help of a small inheritance I bought a house on a quiet street in a New York suburb, and rode the train to and from the city Monday through Friday. In other words, I was in a rut; a satisfying rut, but a rut just the same. Then, about 40 years ago, something happened to permanently change my daily routine.

An old woman named Margaret Kendall lived several doors away, in a house much grander than mine. She was the childless widow of a surgeon, someone said, and while I was pleasant to her whenever we met, I never dreamed she was thinking of me in regards to what she called, “an assignment of infinite importance.”

It was a Saturday in early June, a day that promised to be warm. I’d slept in, and upon rising listened to all-news radio while I ate my breakfast -- cereal and milk; I told you I was in a rut-- and checked my email. Finding all satisfactory, I dressed and went for a walk. As I passed Mrs. Kendall’s house I saw her sitting in a rocking chair on the vine-entwined porch. I nodded in a friendly fashion, and was surprised to hear her say, “Oh, young man!” I stopped, and watched her struggle to get up, clutching the porch railing to keep her balance.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kendall,” I said, smiling agreeably.

“Would you please come here a moment?” I nodded, thinking she wanted me to run an errand, or perform some slight domestic chore. I walked up the front steps, and as I drew nearer saw that she was even older than I imagined, and obviously worried about something. “I’m Margaret Kendall,” she said, extending a skinny hand. I started to introduce myself, but she said, “I know who you are. I’ve heard good reports of you.”

I felt mildly flattered, but was puzzled enough to say, “From whom, may I ask?”

“Betty Lewis,” Mrs. Kendall answered, and I recognized the name of my snoopy next door neighbor.

“Oh, that’s nice,” I said, not meaning it. She didn’t immediately reply, so I asked, “Is there something I can do for you?”

She seemed relieved. “There certainly is, oh my yes,” she said. “Something you can do for me – not just for me, but for all of mankind – such a great favor.” She held out her arm. I took it, and we walked the few feet to the front door. I pushed it open and went in besides her.

The house must have built in the late 1800s, and little seemed to have change since then: the parlor, on our left, and the dining room opposite were chockfull of Victorian era furniture, all of it very dark, and the dining room was in gloom from the drawn drapes. I saw on the table a black wooden box, about a foot square and six inches high. Mrs. Kendall raised the lid to reveal, on a folded cloth cushion, a small silver-colored disk about four inches across; it was glowing faintly, and seemed to glow more strongly as we talked.

She began, “I know you won’t believe me, you’ll think I’m crazy” -- I smiled and dismissed that possibility with a wave of my hand – “but this is the sun, the real sun, not the one that’s up in the sky.”

I sighed inwardly. The poor woman, living all alone, was clearly delusional. I said all I could think of, which was, “That doesn’t seem possible, Mrs. Kendall.”

“But it’s true,” she insisted, and I thought again of how unwell she looked. “The sun derives its power from this little disk, and perhaps they also communicate that way, the disk and the sun, I mean. I’ve owned it for ever so long.” She told me the story. She was in her late twenties, newly

married and living in an apartment in Brooklyn. An elderly man, a retired professor named Szapary, lived in the same building, and she and he became friends. He lived on his own as long as he could, into his late eighties, and then his daughter came to take him to stay with her. Before leaving he gave the box to Mrs. Kendall, explaining that the disk had been in his family for centuries – he claimed he could trace his ancestry back 800 years – and successive generations had followed the tradition of lifting the lid for a few minutes, once every 24 hours, to allow the celestial sun to replenish its power. “If someone doesn’t do that it could have devastating consequences for the world,” Szapary had told her. He said he couldn’t take the box and disk with him – “My daughter would never understand” -- so he was asking her to promise that she would raise the lid daily, or, if she found herself unable to do so, to find someone who would.

“A fantastic story,” I said, folding my arms.

“I know it must sound ridiculous, especially to an intelligent young man, but I said I would raise the lid for a few minutes every day, and a promise is a promise.” I nodded. She held out the box. “I’ve decided to entrust it to you, and I’m asking that you do the same thing each day, just for a few minutes. It doesn’t have to be for very long, just so the disk glows a little.”

I hesitated. “Does that mean I’ll have to get up before dawn?”

She laughed. “No, no, the box just needs to be opened once in a calendar day. It doesn’t matter what the weather is like; I imagine the sun is always shining somewhere.”

I started to say, “Why me?” but she had anticipated my protest. “I have confidence in you. I don’t have much longer to live –“ I expressed a disbelief I didn’t feel – “ and this has been a great responsibility....” She smiled and wagged a skinny finger at me. “Besides, Betty Lewis has said such nice things about you.” Betty Lewis again. I gritted my teeth but promised to do what she asked.

I took the box home, and dutifully opened the lid for a few minutes every morning before leaving for work; to my surprise, the disk appeared to glow a little each time. I picked it up on the second day, and examined it. It was slightly warm to the touch, with a surface as smooth as glass; I was unable to guess what it was made of. It didn’t appear to be powered by any sort of battery, but there are all kinds of solar-powered lights, and that’s what I concluded it was.

Mrs. Kendall died a month later, and the report of her death inspired me to conduct an experiment: I decided I would go more than 24 hours without opening the box. Would the world end, I wondered? I laughed at that, but the morning of the second day of my experiment brought troubling news from overseas: temperatures had fallen sharply across Asia, and scientists agreed the cause wasn’t in the atmosphere and its currents, but in the sun itself; it appeared to have suddenly lost energy, and the trend was accelerating. For an instant the unworthy thought struck

me that I could manipulate global stock markets that way, playing off people's fears of an apocalypse, but then I hastened to the box and flung open the lid. There was a burst of light like that made by an old-fashioned flashbulb, followed by a strong but steady glow; it was my imagination, of course, but I could almost feel the disk looking resentfully at me. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "It won't happen again." And it didn't.

That was, as I said, many years ago. After retiring I sold my home and moved to a condominium in Florida, taking my most precious possessions, and the black box, with me. I spent two happy years by the ocean, and then came bad news from my doctor: six months to live, he said; I'd better get my affairs in order. Well, it had been a good life; I'd seen and done a great deal. True, I had no immediate family, but I've always thought a wife and children could be decidedly mixed blessings. Besides, what would my wife had said if I told her I had to open the black box once a day or life on earth might soon end? Would she have humored me, or would I have come home one day to learn that the box and disk had been donated to a church sale or thrift shop, or placed in a recycle bin.

With the close of my life in sight it was imperative that I find someone I could trust with the sun's power source. I approached two people I knew slightly, and got only mocking laughter for my pains. Then I thought of my building's superintendent, Dennis Price, a hard-working, no-nonsense man of perhaps 35, with a wife and two children. I sent for Dennis and explained the situation. He seemed understandably skeptical, but didn't refuse.

“The world – well, something very important could be at stake,” I said. He sat unmoved. “Of course I’d pay you a small fee to do this –” more interest on his part – “though when I’m gone from this world (I’d told him about my state of health) I would need to rely upon your word.”

“Once a day, you said?” I nodded. “OK, I can manage that.” I gave him a small sum of money, and he took the box away.

For a week nothing happened; life went on as before. Then came news reports from Asia, similar to the ones I’d heard so many years before: a sudden and inexplicable reduction in the sun’s surface temperature, and the ensuing debate over what that meant, and how long it might last. I went immediately to the bungalow Price shared with his wife and children, and found him assembling a dollhouse in the backyard.

“Hi,” he said, unconcernedly.

“The disk...you must have failed to open the box yesterday,” I began.

He shrugged. “Guess I forgot. Oh well, I’ll get to it tomorrow.”

“No,” I insisted, “you must go and do it now.”

He showed his irritation. “Look, pop, I’m busy at the moment – I’ll get to your little errand as soon as I can, OK?”

“Oh, Dennis, give him back his toy,” said his wife, who’d been listening to us from the porch.

The box is by my bedside now, and I still have sufficient strength and presence of mind to lift the lid each morning. Bur, for how much longer? Much of the time I spend lying here on my bed, watching the reflected light of the sun dancing on my bedroom walls, thinking, who can I trust to do this? Could I trust you?