

## TIME OFF!

By Helena Clare Pittman

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“PSST!” said a voice in the dark. “Wake up!” It was Number One. Number Two opened an eye and yawned. “Is it morning?” asked Two. “It’s six after one,” said One. “The little hand is pointing at me. The big hand just passed.”

“It’s coming over this way,” agreed Two.

“I’m tired of hanging around here doing nothing!” said One.

The alarm clock ticked. It tocked. On the clock face, the other numbers stirred. They sat listening to the creak of the clock’s spring and the *tock-tock, tick-tick* of its gears. They watched as the big hand pointed to each of them, then moved on.

“Time is just passing away,” said Five.

“Hour after hour,” agreed Six.

“Days, weeks, months!” added Seven.

“Years!” Eight chimed in.

“That alarm gives me a headache!” said Nine.

“I saw we do something about it,” said One.

“What can *we* do?” asked Four.

The others waited.

“Let’s have a look around,” said One.

“Explore the place!” said Two.

“Explore the world beyond Time!” declared Ten.

There was an awed silence.

Twelve whispered, “Maybe there are others like us. If we find them, we could ask them to take over for a while so we can have some time off.”

Everyone looked at Twelve. “Time off!” some numbers echoed. Other nodded. A few clapped.

Four looked doubtful. “But . . .”

“Let’s go!” said One.

“We’ll need to work together,” said Twelve.

“We always do,” said Six.

So the circle of numbers leaned against the glass and pushed.

“Teamwork!” cried Twelve.

They pushed and pushed until, *thwank!* The glass gave way.

“Free!” cried One, riding the minute hand to the shelf. Numbers Two through Twelve followed, tumbling over one another in excitement.

They stood along the shelf, looking at the floor.

“It’s a long way down,” said Four.

“Come on,” said One. “Hold on to me.”

One and Four made a boat and sailed to the floor. Three crept down the wall like a caterpillar. Eight bicycled down. Ten became an umbrella and floated. Six and Nine skated. Eleven turned into skis and slalomed. Twelve made a sled. Two, Seven, and Five hooked up, bumping and rocking their way to the floor. When they landed, the others untangled them. The clock face looked blankly on. The hands waved good-bye.

The numbers crept across the carpet until they came upon a desk. On the desk sat a book.

Nine hopped up to read its cover. “M-A-T-H,” read Nine. The math book fanned its pages.

“Wow!” exclaimed Nine. “This thing is full of numbers! Some are bigger than we are!”

“Bigger than me?” asked Twelve.

“We’re from the clock,” One called up to the numbers in the math book.

“We’re going downstairs. Do you want to come?”

“We’re looking for others like ourselves,” added Seven.

“Looks like you found some!” cried a Thirty-three.

Numbers burst from the math book. They mobbed the desktop and clambered to the floor.

The crowd stampeded for the hall. They stopped when they came to the tall banister.

“Teamwork!” Twelve reminded everyone.

They piled onto each other’s points and crooks until they made a tower. Then they hauled each other up, one by two by three, until they all stood on the handrail. Next they slid in numerical order to the first floor, double digits and complicated fractions bringing up the rear.

“Follow me!” cried One.

“Wait a minute,” said Eight. “Let someone else go first for a change!”

“It ought to be Twelve,” said Four.

“That’s only right,” agreed Eleven.

“Thank you,” said Twelve modestly and led the way to the kitchen.

At the kitchen door they stopped.

“Sh!” said Four.

*Tock-tick*, they heard. *Tock-tick, tock-tick, tock!*

“What is it?” whispered Seven.

“It sounds familiar,” whispered Four.

“What do you know?” exclaimed One. “It’s another clock!”

But that wasn’t all. “Look there!” cried Six. Hanging from a hook on the wall was a pad of paper ruled with squares. Inside each square sat a number. The crowd on the floor hurried to the wall and stared.

The calendar numbers stared back. “Well, how rude!” said its Twenty-three. That broke the spell.

“Excuse us,” said Twelve, “but we’re looking for others like ourselves.”

“We’re from the clock upstairs,” said Seven.

“What is your job?” asked Nine politely.

“We number the days,” said Thirty-one.

“The days!” exclaimed the others in admiration.

“We’ve decided to explore the world,” said Twelve. “Do you want to join us?”

“Twenty-three looked coolly at Twelve. “What do you think” it said, turning to the other calendar numbers.

“Let’s go!” cried Thirty-one.

In a great tumult the calendar numbers slid from their spiral-bound pages to the floor. The kitchen clock numbers scrambled down and joined them.

“We are many!” cried Eleven.

“A multitude,” said Twelve.

“It makes me nervous,” said Four.

Silence fell.

“We’re with you, Four,” said Seven.

“You’re not alone,” said Eight.

“Together we’re strong,” said Ten.

“Then let’s go!” said Four.

The throng of numbers stopped by the telephone book, the pile of shopping receipts, and the price stickers on the food boxes and cans. Then they trekked outside and picked up the house address. Everyone cheered as One-hundred-and-two parachuted to the porch floor to join them.

“Over here!” a voice called when they returned to the kitchen. “On the table!” it was the radio. Its numbers were flashing.

“More numbers!” Twelve exclaimed.

“We’re growing by the minute,” agreed Eleven.

The crowd of numbers scaled the table legs. Twelve switched on the radio. Three asked Four to waltz. Six and Seven jitterbugged. One and Five tangoed. The double digits square-danced. Others whirled and stomped.

“This surpasses all expectation!” said Three.

The numbers changed partners and danced to the next tune. Then the radio stopped playing music, and a loud voice began talking. With a *click*, the radio switched itself off. Everything was quiet.

Five was the one who broke the silence. "Haven't you ever wanted to do something important?"

Everyone looked at Five.

"Those sleepers upstairs couldn't do anything without us," said a Sixty.

"They couldn't make appointments," said a Twenty-nine.

"Or tell time!" added Four.

"Or know where they live!" said One-hundred-and-two.

Two stepped forward. "There *is* something I've always wanted to do," said Two. "I've always wanted to play!"

"You mean like Twenty Questions?" said Four.

"I mean - math!"

"Math is hardly a game!" said a number Forty.

But Sixty-four was flattered. "Twenty-five and thirty-three are fifty-eight" it said.

"Twelve and twenty are thirty-two," said someone else.

"Forty-four and sixty?"

"A hundred and four!"

"Eight times eight?"

"Sixty-four!"

They added, subtracted, multiplied, and divided until they were tangled and exhausted. Then they chatted, discovering all they had in common. One approached the math book numbers and asked if they could take over on the clock from time to time.

"Listen!" said Five suddenly. "Isn't it awfully quiet?"

"They're still sleeping upstairs," said One.

"Isn't it morning?" asked Nine. "We've been playing for hours."

One went to the window. "It's still night!" declared One. "Look at all those stars!"

The numbers hurried outside.

Four wondered how many there were.

"Too many to count!" said Eight.

"They are infinite!" said Six.

"What does that mean?" asked Two.

"It means they go on forever," said Twelve.

"Like we do," said Seven.

The numbers exchanged looks of satisfaction.

"But too much time has passed for it to be night!" said Three.

"No time has passed all!" declared Twelve. "I never thought of that!"

"You mean time has stopped?" asked Eleven in disbelief.

Twelve nodded.

"We're not doing our jobs!" said Ten as the truth began to dawn on them all.

One gave a long, low whistle. “We really are important!”

The numbers looked around at one another in wonder.

“We ought to go back,” said Three.

“But this is so much fun!” said Four.

“We’ll do it again,” said Two.

“How about next year?” said Five.

“Sure!” said Seven.

“Same time, same place!” said Thirty-one.

“Let’s go home,” said One.

Ones by twos, threes by fours, tens by twenties, the numbers hurried upstairs to the shelf. They pushed and pulled each other back to their places on the smooth white clock face, which extended its hands to help them. One looked at the sun, just beginning to rise outside the window.

“BRRRRRIIIINNNG!” went the clock’s alarm, and the sleepers woke feeling very well rested.

With a yawn, One nestled between Twelve and Two and waited for the big hand to sweep by.