[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** Snappers, I want to tell you about a podcast I dig. It's called Live Wire. It's a lot like late night but it's for your ears. It features host Luke Burbank, and the conversations are intimate, funny, truly thought-provoking. Live Wire, it's a perfect place to discover new writers, filmmakers, comedians, musicians, you also catch on your faves like Kamau Bell, and Pink Martini just to name a couple. And Live Wire's Best New Segment, featuring new stories that will actually brighten your day. Listen to Live Wire on Apple Podcast, Spotify, or wherever you listen.

[pensive music]

You're listening to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington. And it's 2004, Joel Gheen, just left military training to get married and go to college. He's got a new life, got him a new wife, but he's having serious problems getting places on time. As the story starts, Joel and his wife are living in an off-campus apartment.

Snap Judgment

[pensive music]

**Joel:** It's a mile to campus, so I pretty much had to be on campus by 9:00 AM every day. I need to be catching the 836 shuttle, and it really is to the minute. I got up and I got dressed and grabbed my bag with my books in it. Okay, shuttle is going to be here soon. Walk out the back door, lock it, walk over to the corner. And as I was getting into the stop, I could see the shuttle disappearing up the hill. I was like, "I must have left a minute later than I thought." Or the shuttle was a little earlier, maybe a little bit of both. They're just not really early. Now, I have to speed walk to campus. By the time I got to class, I was a little late, which was annoying. But I just went about my day.

The next morning, I wasn't really thinking about it. I just thought, "All right, I missed the shuttle yesterday. I better be a little faster." I do like to be on time. That was pounded into me in the military. And so, I kept a closer eye on the time and gave myself a few minutes more to spare. And I got to the shuttle stop and the shuttle wasn't there. And nobody else was either. I'm looking around going, "The shuttle canceled? Everybody knew but me somehow? What's going on?" After standing there for a minute or two and realizing the shuttle is not coming, I walked to class as fast as I could. [door opens] I was even later that day. The professor's like, "What's your problem? Why aren't you showing up on time?" I don't really have an explanation besides the shuttle is not running properly.

On the third day, I'm determined to get my life back on track so to speak. I double-check my clocks in the morning, I get up earlier, I get out to the bus stop, plenty of time to spare. There should be other people here waiting for the bus to go to class, and I'm here all by myself. I hurry to class, get there as fast as I can. And I'm late. Embarrassingly late. No matter what I do, I'm behind. I get that knot of anxiety right in the middle of my chest, right below my solar plexus, and it just constricts everything. It feels like I can't breathe completely. I wasn't used to being confused. I'm former military. I was taught how to assess the situation, gather data, find a course of action. And that had built a lot of confidence in me. I felt like I should be able to get through a day on campus correctly. That should be easy, and it turns out it wasn't

I talked to my wife about it. I said, "Hey, I keep being late to stuff." She was the one who said, "Well, why don't you set your watch and wear it?" I have a Seiko watch that my father gave me for my 18th birthday. Nothing too fancy. But it was in my nightstand desk drawer. I set it by the alarm clock on my dresser. [watch winding sounds] What I noticed was the campus flow didn't make sense. It's a busy campus, there are tens of thousands of students when school is in full session, you're going to have crowds of people moving back and forth between buildings. Those movements tend to correspond with the top of the hour. And it seemed a little bit off. At times when it should have been crowded but wasn't. When I thought it should have been quiet, it was crowded. Nothing was quite the way it should be.

There was an errand that I needed to run on campus. [engine starts] There was a metered parking spot right by the campus building I needed to go to. They would only enforce the meters after 5:00 PM because they didn't want students trying to park overnight. I parked there, I checked my watch, I had plenty of time. I did my appointment and came back, and I had a parking ticket. I just set my watch this morning. It was 4:57 or something like that. I looked at the ticket and the ticket said, "It was 5:09 PM." I thought, "I'm going to protest this ticket. This is so unfair. I'm a poor student. I can't pay this." I don't remember what the fine was, $40 or something. I can't pay $40 just because they're being greedy and giving me tickets that I don't deserve.

I angrily went back to my apartment and called the parking office. Said, "Hey, you gave me a parking ticket at the wrong time. You guys are setting your clocks ahead on your parking ticket writers." She said, "No. Our clocks synchronize to an atomic clock twice a day. So, you misread your watch." I said, "No. I've carefully read my watch and I just set it." She said, "Then, all your clocks are wrong." I thought, "Maybe one of my clocks was wrong, but all of them?"

I was friends with the couple across the hall and his name was Manoj. So, I went across the hall knocked on his door [knock on the door] and chatted with Manoj. And from where I was standing, I could see one of his clocks and I could see his clock matched my clock. I really don't know what's going on. My wife said, "Well, let's get online, go look up the correct time, and reset all the clocks because you got a parking ticket. You big buffoon, you got a parking ticket." So, I did. I went online and checked and sure enough, all of my clocks were about 17 minutes behind. So, I reset all my clocks. I had an alarm clock, an oven clock, and a microwave clock. [beeps] What a relief now I know what the problem is. My clocks are off. I'll reset them and then everything will be fine. I think that was a Friday.

Monday morning, I'm feeling pretty confident. And I miss the bus again. [vehicle sounds] My emotions were shifting from annoyance and frustration, to fear and suspicion. I was feeling like the world was conspiring against me somehow but I had no idea how. It makes me think of watching the show, *The Office*, where Jim pranks Dwight, and he does stuff like changing the weight of his phone handset or slightly moving his desk a little bit. But to change somebody's clocks every day is a pretty major prank. I just couldn't think of who would be doing this and how they would be getting into my apartment. It even crossed my mind at one point like, "Is my wife doing this?" But that's just not her. That's not the kind of prank she would play. And it's just running through my head, "What is wrong? What is going on?"

I sat on the couch, looked out the window and I got up and I shut the curtains. And I sat back down to contemplate my own sanity for a few minutes. My mind was spinning, trying to fit all the pieces together. Okay, last week, I was late every day. And then, I got a parking ticket, and that told me in no uncertain terms that I was operating on a slightly different time than everybody else because the parking clocks were correct, and the parking meter lady when I called them to complain about the tickets said, "All of your clocks must be wrong." I checked and they were wrong. Resetting my clocks, thinking I had solved it, realizing I hadn't. Sitting in my apartment at my wit's end, feeling shut off from the whole world and wondering, "Is this my life now? Maybe the world is too confusing for me? Maybe I can't operate effectively." That was a very lonely moment. Everything in the world looked suspicious.

Some of the work I did in the military was psychological work that was moving towards a particular career path, field intelligence, which is a lot uglier than it sounds. So, if you want to upset somebody and if you want to completely brainwash them into new patterns, then what you have to do is adjust subtly, things that they don't realize are being adjusted. When I was training people in the military, and I went through this myself, they would actually mess with the length of days. And then, when I was training people, I did that too. And you get to where if you wake somebody up, and it's dark, and you feed them breakfast, they assume it's morning. I had no idea who or what or why, or even how, but it felt like somebody was doing this to me.

[clock ticking]

I felt like I was living through a glitch in the Matrix. I felt like the system had hiccupped and I was the casualty. Or, the equally terrifying possibility is, "I'm going crazy. Something's wrong with my brain and I'm the only one who knows it." When I talked to my wife about it, I don't recall telling her, "Hey, I think there's something wrong with me." It's too scary to say it out loud when you think it might be true. We were newlyweds too. [laughs] That's not an announcement you want to make to your lovely young bride. It just didn't seem like a very fair thing to bring her into until I had a little more data.

[intriguing music]

I was standing on my back patio. And I was looking up the hill towards campus. And then I started thinking it's a mile from here to campus and why would I be different from campus? Is there a spacetime phenomenon right here in my apartment specifically? And then, I suddenly realized all of my clocks are plugged into the wall. That was the aha moment. That was the ray of hope. I got online and got on the website. And I was like, "Okay, who the heck could I call?" So, I get this number and I call this guy who normally never has a student call him because he's a maintenance guy. I think the guy's name was Paul. And I said, "I live in student housing on the east side of campus at this intersection. Am I on a different electrical grid than the rest of campus?" And he said, "Oh, yeah, actually, you are. You're on, we call it B-Grid. You're separate from the rest of campus and most of the other housing is on A-Grid." I'm sounding like an emotionally disturbed circus of an individual trying to explain that, "Something was wrong with time and electricity, and my life was messed up. And can you do anything about this parking ticket, please?" He's like, "Why are you calling to tell me this? Why am I having to listen to this person have this breakdown?" He said, "I think you need to see somebody. I'm not the person you should be talking to about this." And then, I kind of yelled at him. "No, you don't understand. All of my clocks that are plugged into the wall are slowing down, [echoes] down, down."

There's this long silence. And he goes, "Holy shit." He started explaining to me and I could barely follow but the power is pulsing by the outlet, you're getting what's called an alternating current. The pulses are supposed to match a certain frequency. If that frequency is off, then if you've got the digital clock plugged into the wall, it's giving the clock a false sense of how quickly time is passing, which meant all of my clocks were slowing down. And because I was on that separate grid from everybody else, it was affecting me and the very few people in my little building and not affecting most other people. It was that flood of relief, that warm flood of relief that, "Oh, I'm going to be okay. I don't live in a broken world." Not broken in the way I thought it was, has plenty of other problems, but there wasn't a spacetime glitch in my apartment. It was fixed more or less immediately within 24 hours. My clocks weren't off anymore but you better believe I didn't rely exclusively on plugged in digital clocks anymore.

[phone dial]

I called the parking ticket place and said, "Hey, this parking ticket was actually the university's fault. I'm fined because you guys messed up my clocks." And they were like, "Very funny. You still have to pay the parking ticket."

[riveting music]

**Glynn:** Thank you, Joel, for sharing your story with us. If you're hungry for more details about Joel's experience with a real-life glitch in the Matrix*,* we'll have more information on *snapjudgment.org*. Original Score for that piece was by Dirk Schwarzhoff. It was produced by Anne Ford.

[riveting music]

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*