

Short Story
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Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick...

The gentle ticking of the grandfather clock filled the living room. The movements of its smallest hand were marked by a soft ticking sound which could only be audible in silence. That, or one simply needed to be accustomed to listening for it.

The clock was the newest addition to these living corridors, and had been for apparently four years – something I wouldn't have known or particularly even inquired about had he not stressed this trifle on a daily

basis. He often considered “erratic” changes in schedule or décor a sign of abnormality. Only “the freakish in nature” required a change of scenery, and at first, I didn’t understand what he’d meant. I also thought this sentiment was a little *insensitive* of him to say . . . After all, the clock had been presented to him by his *mother* as a gift. She never lingered around long enough to see how this present was received, but I don’t think her son much liked it. Its discreet ticking sometimes had a way of making him twitch. . . I noticed quickly that he sometimes had a habit of twitching when things were unfamiliar to him or they didn’t go *exactly* as he wanted . . .

As the clock continued ticking, I had gone to the chest – part of the “accepted” furniture in the room – and had withdrawn my drawing utensils. Momentarily tranquil in manner, I sat myself by a window. Always perched by a window, gazing out. . .

I turned away after a while and gently picked up a piece of charcoal, a soft melody floating on the currents around me as I hummed and drew a fluid line – another and another – keeping my voice in tune with each stroke from my small, rhythmic hand. (I tend to forget the world around me when I’m drawing, lost in a world of myself.)

Suddenly, my insides jumped, cringing as a loud voice shattered my calm.

“Stop! NO. *QUIET!*”

The charcoal slipped through my grasp and fell to the floor, breaking in half. All I seemed to be able to do was stare at the pieces, frozen, *tense*. There came an abrupt banging on the door, even though it was wide open . . . He was pounding on it for the sake of just . . . *pounding* . . . but still my gaze remained locked on the floor for another long minute of eternity.

I was terrified to look at the clock. And although I hadn't peered up, I could feel his eyes burning hotter than fire.

*"I trusted you! How dare you **lie** to me!"*

I'd lost track of time . . . I'd been in our house since the moment I'd risen from our bed; it wasn't as if I'd escaped and *abandoned* him. Sometimes I wondered if that's essentially what his mother had done, relieving herself of a toxin and injecting it into me. From what I was told, he wasn't *always* this . . . strange. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't terrified by these episodes. The very first occurrence, when he'd asked if I'd heard "the voices," I started giggling. I thought he'd gotten a hold of some wine and was just jesting. I didn't know it then, but he was completely sober, and until I looked at him, I assumed he was laughing along with me, as well.

But he wasn't.

Not at all.

He was very . . . *horribly*. . . angry and frightening.

Shortly after that, I discovered he had been listening to my "suggestions" and had somehow (rather

conveniently) become an aficionado of wine. “Do you even know . . . w-why I drink? I have to . . . have to drink to . . . LOOK at you!” Something he hadn’t even heard himself speak until my expressed reaction swept a brush of recognition over his eyes. He then managed to grab my flower vase from the neighboring table (with the flowers still in it!) and smash it against the wall – too far from me to cause harm, but just close enough to rustle the wind for the impacted blow.

I remember him walking up to the door in a fury, but just as his hand embraced the doorknob, he decided to take in my closeness. I was absolutely petrified as he took my wrist. Pale, fragile wrist raised in his hand like an unfortunate bird who had forgotten how to fly right above the gaped mouth of a hungry lion. There was no doubt in my mind that this man could harm me...

I flinched.

But before he could rip my hand free of my arm, he just leaned in and planted a kiss to my wrist instead.

How sweet of him.

How *fortunate* for me . . .

Most people would consider this the recollection of being in the presence of a pitiful, drunken man. If only it were that simple . . .

“Melinda said! Melinda *said* you’d forget,” he spat in contempt, causing my thoughts to snap back into the present.

“You’re all against me but *her*! You *enjoy* hurting me!”

I knew it was impossible to communicate with him over this. I'd tried to talk to him and understand, but the more I had attempted to help the worse it became. Sometimes he'd spew profanities, others he'd outright say I was tempting Death . . . (to put matters lightly).

My voice was timid. "Maybe Melinda would like a drink too? Maybe some wine will quiet her down –"

I couldn't finish. His fist collided so forcibly with the wall, it left behind the stamp of his brutality.

"YOU KNOW TOO MUCH WINE MAKES HER EVEN *MORE* BOISTEROUS!"

I stared in horror, my heartbeat accelerating in my chest and my breathing rapid. In the back of my mind I wondered how his hand hadn't been crushed, yet my subconscious echoed back,

*"Be grateful that **wall** wasn't you."*

Sometimes I wanted to just shake him and scream, "Don't you know? You don't have to be like this!" He must be so lonely, so profoundly isolated from all that exists outside the cacophony in his skull.

I swallowed thickly, "I'm sorry . . . you know, she hasn't come to visit us in a while. I must have forgotten. I'll put on some tea for her, then . . .?"

My question went unacknowledged.

Scowling, he directed, "Look at me when you speak." (Yes . . . *that* sounded more like him . . .)

I rose from my chair by the window and cut in front of him, guiltily feeling like a prisoner in my own home. How callous would I be if I left? The room . . .

the house . . . his life? He was clearly afflicted; I refused to be like his mother . . . It's not like *I* didn't care for him . . .

Caring for him was the most crippling part. *Loving* him made me contemplate my own sanity...

If I stood straight enough, perhaps I could meet his shoulder – though that was being generous – and if anything (even when he wasn't like *this*) I always had an overwhelming desire to withdraw inside myself, to shrink whenever he was near. He must have known this to some extent, I was certain, but nothing was ever voiced – and for that I was secretly grateful.

The heat rose to my cheeks, crimson surely seeping into alabaster as I tilted my head upwards ever so slightly, barely enough to meet his eyes. They were still burning, which made me quickly second-guess myself.

Always second-guessing.

It was an honest question that came from my lips next, so faint that it was barely audible if one was not listening for it. Like the ticking from that clock (which I had begun to hear again), *part* of me hoped he'd overlook my words as well.

“Melinda doesn't have to have a drink at all. Why not tell her to come back later? I was hoping it'd just be *us* –”

He shoved me – violently – then, and I stumbled backwards. I just missed colliding with the clock;

however, I could not prevent myself from falling. I curled up on the floor, my corset had now shifted into an uncomfortable position that dug into my rib cage and made me tear up in both eyes, a stabbing sensation to add to the tearing apart of my heart.

“You’re not even *real!*” I could see him begin to twitch, looking down at me as I lay there waiting for the pain to subside. I shifted my focus to his shoes instead, unable to endure that stare. “I should make *you* go away – *Tick! Tick! Tick!* – I hate that infernal clock – no, no! *I hate you!*”

No he doesn’t. He doesn’t hate me. He kissed me once, and I’m convinced that a kiss is never *just* a kiss... No, not that one he’d left on the wrist.

The *other* one! Like that clock, I too had been a gift, and he had *accepted* me.

His shouting relentlessly pushed through the haze of my mind. “Yes! Both useless! Best get rid of you *both!*”

He’s making me mad too, isn’t he . . . ?

But then his voice leveled, reflecting that split-second change in him.

“Well. Get off the floor, then,” he said firmly. “I’ll take my wine. I should have been finishing my first glass by now. I suppose I can overlook a change in schedule, just this once. Get up.”

I tried to remain composed and lifted myself from the floor as if nothing had ever transpired.

“Should I draw an extra chair then?”

His brow rose. “For?”

My mouth parted in a small o-shape.

“Melinda,” I said.

He burst out laughing at this, and I rubbed the sides of my arms, trying not to appear too unnerved. I was incredibly unsure how to handle such a reaction.

“Oh, darling,” he managed after drawing a long breath, “you amuse me.”