

Cobblestones and Ballerinas

As I climbed the stairs up to the attic, each one creaked at a different interval, like keys on a piano that had long since gone out of tune. My footsteps were heavy as I trudged up, carrying a plastic bin so tall I had to peer to the right of it to see if I had reached the top. Inside was an array of red, black, and white boxes, each containing a neatly sorted deck of cards and bearing the grinning face of a joker with a tiny spiky hat that had long creeped my grandma out.

When my grandpa was in the kitchen, she had handed me the bin, cupped her hand to my ear, and whispered, "Go hide these from him upstairs. I think they're watching me." While she was a sweet old lady, she had been losing some of her wits recently, jumping at even the sound of the washing machine upstairs. My mom had sent me here for a few weeks this summer while she was in Nepal for a business trip, despite my friend Lucy's parents agreeing to let me stay over. Mom said that I only had so much time with them left, but I honestly could not think of a worse way to spend my summer.

The shadow of the door loomed above me, and before I knew it, I felt the bin thud against the white-painted wood. I stretched my arm to the side and gripped the chipped, ornate gold handle, and it, too, creaked open.

As I stepped inside, the acrid stench of the attic filled my nostrils and infiltrated my lungs. I dropped the bin to the ground as I tripped and fell to my knees, the dust only seeming to penetrate my airways further as I hacked and coughed it out. The plastic bin tumbled onto its side into a tower of U-Haul boxes from my grandparent's move, and the dust that had settled there long ago swirled back up into the air in mesmerizing spirals that almost made me forget the resentment I had felt against it just moments ago.

Amidst the tower's wreckage, I spotted a glimmering of rusty metal far from the dullness of the rest of the attic. A ray of light from the cracked window in the corner seemed to fragment as it descended upon the contraption, illuminating a steely gray pipe that seemed to twist infinitely around a small clock. Only, it wasn't just a normal clock.

"No," I thought, as I rose from my knees, "Are there... two clocks inside of it?" Yes, there were two distinct centers to the singular clock, but only one set of roman numerals encircling it. Curiously, only the second hands seemed to be working, as they danced and skipped around the exterior. I stumbled forward in awe, watching the hands as they tick-tick-ticked their way around.

The longer I watched, the faster they danced, and soon it seemed the clock had forgotten the value of a second. Tick. Tick. Tick. As they spun faster and faster around, it seemed to me they had come to life. Arms formed before my very eyes as the dancers maintained perfect posture.

"Was I their audience?" I wondered in awe.

As the ballerinas twirled amongst the roman numerals, a screeching sound started from the belly of the pipe wrapped like a snake around the clock. I fell backwards in shock, as an off-kilter harmony of pipes seemed to echo from inside, the haunting tune piercing through the musty attic. I stared in shock as the dancers leaped so fast around the clock they started to blur, and the instrument rose from the cracked wooden floor.

As it floated upwards, I thought to myself, "I must be dreaming. Yes, I will wake up any second now." But my heart was still pounding, the blood rushing through my ears so fast the roar of it nearly drowned out the scream of the machine. As it reached the ceiling, I craned my neck to follow it. The metal shriek reached a fever pitch, and the world went white.

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“My dear, are you alright?”

I opened my eyes to find I was lying on a cobblestone street, each stone pressing into my spine. I lifted myself up onto my forearms and looked around in bewilderment. I seemed to be in the middle of a market of sorts, surrounded by an endless sea of cloth-covered stalls selling everything from tomatoes to shoes to oysters. But no, something seemed... off. The shoes all had large buckles on them with low sloping collars. They reminded me of what leprechauns wore on TV or cereal boxes. The women bustling about all had long skirts, so long you couldn't even see their ankles, with neat updos and scarves pinned carefully around them. “Am I at a Renaissance Fair? Some sort of... battleground reenactment?” I thought. But there were no historical signs, no swords for sale... I didn't know what, but I could sense something was deeply wrong.

“Miss? Miss? Are you hurt?” I whipped my head around to the woman leaning over me, clasping a straw basket, her brow furrowed.

“Um—I—Where are we?”

“Why, you're in Winchester! West Cork Street. Did you bump your head?” The lady smiled down at me, her mousy brown hair slipping over her eyes. She brushed it aside as she reached out a hand to help me up, and I took it, raising myself to my feet. Now that she mentioned it, there was a dull throbbing sensation at the back of my head. But I couldn't dwell on that, no, I needed to get back to the clock. Memories began rushing back to me. Card boxes. Ballerinas. A piercing note, like a young child who had just discovered their sibling's trumpet.

I didn't know quite what had happened, but I did know I needed to get back to that clock immediately. As if it had heard my thoughts, I saw a glint of steely gray between two red brick houses a ways down the street. I dropped the lady's hand and ran. Foot to stone. Hair flying. The world went quiet, as if muffled by a pillow. I registered the lady's voice calling out to me from

behind, but the words had no meaning, paling in comparison to my compulsory need to feel the cool pipes beneath my fingertips.

I was closing in on it now, my vision tunneling as little faceless dancers did piqué turns about the cobblestones. Just a few more strides and I would reach it, be back in my attic with the U-Haul boxes and mountains of dust. I lunged for it, parallel to the street, arm stretched so far I thought my hand would surely sever itself from my wrist. Something deep inside of me knew that without the clock, I would very well turn into one of the ladies in the long skirts shopping amongst these stalls. That I would never again see my grandma's powder blue glasses and the way her eyes crinkled behind them. That I would never again watch my grandpa play a game of blackjack with his neighbors while sipping from his chipped Yellowstone National Park mug. That I would never truly be me again. At least, not as I had been.

There was a hair's width between us, my very essence aching to be reunited with this anchor to my life. The ballerinas seemed to wink at me, knowing my desperation. The clock twinkled in the alley light, as if waving goodbye, before collapsing in on itself into nothingness.