

The Timekeeper

By: Sally Jamrog

The ticking was incessant. My grandfather had always liked it that way. He seemed to find a certain comfort in the rhythm. He had always been a schedule-driven man, not a fan of spontaneity, so I figured his clocks provided a reliable certainty, something that would always stay the same. His house was special, as a house with that many clocks is bound to be. The very walls seemed to be made of them, those constant tickers, and seemed to sag as though time itself was too heavy a burden to bear. Where he ran out of room on the walls, you could find them behind doors, in closets, or even inside kitchen cabinets. Cuckoo clocks, grandfather clocks, musical clocks, no two alike, each with a distinct chime upon the hour.

Every day after school I would walk to his house.

“You must never be late,” my mother would remind me each morning. “Your grandfather expects you at 3:15 exactly.” And every day I was never late, ringing the doorbell at 3:15 and he would smile and greet me with that sparkle in his eye, the one that made me love him more tenderly than ever.

“Hello, Elizabeth, it’s lovely to see you!” He would say. Or sometimes, “It’s such a wonderful day outside!”

We always had the same schedule. He would take me inside, we would sit down at the kitchen table, and he would listen to the stories I, as my ten-year-old self, might have to tell about my day. I would munch my milk and cookies, (always two cookies and a glass of milk three-quarters full) and he would respond, “What a wonderful school you go to!” Or sometimes, “How about that!”

He would always tell the same story about the first clock he fixed, to which I would respond, “Grandpa, you’ve told me that one before,” and he would say, “Oops! I guess I’m older than I used to be!”

At his workbench, I would raptly gaze over his shoulder to watch him tinker with a broken piece, hands and faces ticking all around us. It would amaze me how fast his nimble fingers fiddled and played with the parts of a gadget until, miraculously, it would be fixed. His old fingers still fixed with a clear purpose. Today he was hunched over what appeared to be an antique cuckoo, one of the big ones that hung beside the many tools he kept cleaned and ready to use. I was sitting in the chair he usually pulled out for me (always in the same place) and was swinging my legs in my usual manner. I was particularly interested in today’s patient, whose cuckoo bird popped out at irregular times, giving a discordant call: out of tune and out of time. I had let my legs swing a little slower than my regular speed.

He turned to me frowning and said, “Elizabeth, would you swing your legs a little faster, please?”

I adjusted their pace and his eyes sparkled again, “That’s better, thank you.”

On this particular visit, it was just nearing the end of our time together. I usually stayed until 4:30, when my mother would ring the doorbell and he would let us go with the usual tip of his hat and old-timey farewell.

“I guess it’s time to let you go!” He said cheerily at 4:29 as I watched a clock’s minute hand click into place. We stood up and he pushed in our chairs, walking over to his entryway. I expected the doorbell to ring in a matter of seconds, never early, never late, but exactly on time.

Today it didn’t come.

4:31 passed and it still didn’t come.

She’d never been late before.

The beats of the clocks began to pound in my ears as I felt the silence swell around me. The tocks and the ticks grew oddly out of whack as I felt my grandfather’s hand grow heavier on my shoulder.

“Grandpa?” I asked. I touched his hand and recoiled. Its coldness shocked me. In my surprise, I’d flinched and he toppled over sideways as if he was made of stone. I cried out, rushing to his side and shaking his arms frantically, crying and calling his name. I could feel faces watching me, hands counting my every move. 4:32 passed, then 4:33 and 4:34 until at 4:35 I heard the doorbell ring and jumped to my feet. I wrenched the door wide and took my mother’s hand. My cheeks grew even wetter as I frantically explained to her what had happened, showing her the body of my grandfather growing cold, his eyes dull, their twinkle gone.

She squeezed my shoulders gently, meeting my eyes with a smile. “Don’t worry dear, he just needs to be wound,” she said.

I watched as she pulled a little gold key from out of her pocket. Crouching down beside him, she seemed to insert and twist the key around three times and pocketed it again. I swear I heard the ticking grow a little louder as that spark returned to my grandfather’s eyes.

“Hello, Elizabeth, it’s lovely to see you!”