

The Clock Tower

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I

I am not an uneducated man; I know how these things go. The mad ravings of unimportant men are oft lost in the annals of history. That is why I write this account in the reddest of red, so that perhaps, this one document, this particular raving, may stand a better chance of one day finding eyes, and maybe even – though it seems now to be hope beyond hope – a voice.

Through a venerable and considerate sense of antiquarianism, I have always tried to do what is right by those around me. I believed since youth that one mistake – however grandiose or subtle – ought not be enough to tip the karmic balance against a man. The tale I now recount represents a contrary opinion.

And so, after experiencing great trepidation and fear of some otherworldly reprisal, I have finally become resigned to my fate, and I must begin.

I had always walked the same route, and by sheer fate it was written that Elise would pass me by, every morning, near Dyer Street. She would smile shyly and incline her head and I, in turn, would incline mine, trying to keep my feelings hidden behind a clear, uniform gaze. But oh, how I wanted her, with every nuance of my being. I dreamed of her every inch pressed against me from the moment I first saw her. It was as if, since the tragic passing of my wife, I had been storing the sexual energy somewhere in my

chest and now it was being let loose, wave after torrid wave, into my heart and my head and all the way down into my toes. And yet I managed just a quick nod, every morning, and kept the beast tamed.

Further along my morning walk, I would come across another constant. Daily, The Brigade, as they were known in the town, would be represented by a half a dozen members outside the clock tower. They would have buckets, which they would fill with water from the pump in the square, and through a rough assembly line, douse the stones before the barred entrance of the tower. On some mornings I thought I saw a darker fluid being washed away, but other times I could not say for sure I saw anything. The possibility of seeking any further information was dashed away abruptly by the stern eyes of The Brigade and the way their heavy set shoulders backed their countenance.

Despite these contrary experiences, eye contact of a flirtatious and then threatening nature in turn, my morning sojourn was always a pleasant one. I loved walking through the quiet streets, and eventually coming to the gorgeous clock tower, admiring it from the square, then turning east and heading for the market. There was a spot on the far side of the square where I would often sit and admire the huge monolith that was the pride and joy of our little hamlet.

By all accounts, the clock tower had been built during the plague years, near the beginning of the Great Mortality, and despite the breadth of pestilence, had been carefully maintained, kept pristine by the determined hands of our forefathers. Being so, the clock tower had become quite a symbol of survival to us all, especially due to the huge numbers we lost during and even after the plague. Our town was hit harder than most outside the larger communities, and many of our ancestors lived out lonely and

difficult existences because of their misfortune. But with the clock tower as inspiration to some and a rallying point to others, we managed to regain our happy little place in the world. Though still struck regularly by misfortune – perhaps even more than was normal, some rumoured – we managed to keep our heads high in the air.

The tower itself was constructed of a pale marble which some say was brought all the way from Rome. Through some trick of design, the marble topped the huge structure, but only surrounded the masonry all the way to the bottom. Around the edges of the only aperture, the small door on the backside of the tower, could be seen where the stones and marble met, in a strange overlapping pattern, like a miniature version of the cyclopean designs of so many ancient ruins. The lack of mortar between stones and layers was a mystery to modern architects and it was commonly jested that the builders must have used honey to solidify the work, which explained in that small town way how we were so beset with flying insects – bees, wasps and large flies – throughout the hot summer months.

I and others of like mind figured that it was in fact Italian builders that had constructed the tower, though many of the elder locals would scoff at this notion, throwing us great, devastating glares to exemplify how annoyed they were at the thought of our own kin not having put their very sweat and blood into our beloved clock tower. I, as a gentleman, never pushed the subject.

And why should I? I loved the clock tower as much as the next man or woman. My wife and I, as many before us, were married under its lined marble façade, the darkened clock face witness to our greatest joy.

And our daughter, of course, when barely old enough to breathe the air, was brought to see the clock tower, or perhaps brought so the clock tower could see her. Druicilla, my precious child and sole remembrance of my wife. Oh, how they were alike! Their dark cascading hair and pure, green eyes; the brightness in their skin and that tiny, pointed nose, as if stolen by some gambit from a fairy in the woods.

I would walk home from the market and she would be up, functioning as woman of the house, though not old enough to marry by some years. She had always been that way, helping wherever she could, kindhearted as her mother had always been. She was my life's joy and my whole world revolved around her care.

But, as I mentioned, there came a mistake.

II

One morning I awoke in typical fashion, early and alert, and upon touching Druicilla's forehead with love noticed an irregular heat. I woke her, rather fretfully I must admit, and fawned over her for a short time before she convince me that, although her head hurt, it was nothing to be concerned with, and I should take my morning walk. Unsure of whether I should go, she set me straight, asking me what I would do, just sit and watch her sleep? So I left, though concern weighed heavily on my heart.

As I passed Dyer Street, I was attempting with some effort to calm down. How ridiculous to gather such drama about myself over a fever. In this state, focused on my anxiety, I did not notice the absence of Elise.

I perched in my typical place across the square, again telling myself to relax: as my daughter's only example, I must instill composure and control, so she would become a strong, genuine woman, not one of temerity and flights of fancy. While this strange conflagration of philosophy and emotion swept over me, I hardly noticed Elise approach on my left. She was, in fact, seated beside me before I had any sense I was not alone. When I turned, I felt my heart would leap out of my chest from sheer proximity to the young woman. She smiled, full and open, and I felt a gut-wrenching tear somewhere within my ribcage. I wanted this woman with all my being, but I had kept her at arms length for fear of how it would affect Druicilla. My daughter had always, and must always come first, and yet, in the face of my stresses and with the lovely Elise so near, the effect that evolved was one of intoxication. In hindsight, I had clearly lost some of my faculties, for with what had been on my mind only moments before, I should have been more fortified than ever to keep this woman and the reality of interaction at a great distance.

And yet, what happened felt wholly inevitable to me at the time. The Brigade had just cleared off and without a single word, Elise looked around and slid her fingers into my hand. She stood and I, as though in a dream, stood as well. She led me, quickly, across the square and to the door of the clock tower. She sensed my hesitation as we approached and responded with a simple squeeze of my hand. When I again planted my feet, knowing that we were forbidden from entering the clock tower, she finally spoke.

"I want to show you something," she said, her voice a sweet, dangerous whisper.

She pulled me to the door and, strangely, opened it without incident.

We closed the door behind us and were in a rich, lustrous semi-darkness, to which my eyes began to adjust. I looked at her briefly, but my eyes, along with hers, were drawn upwards by a ray of addled light sifting down through the cogs and gears – splashing and shimmering yellow heat across the somber, burnished face of the machine.

I looked back to Elise and she was beautiful, her brown hair turned golden by the reflected sun. I desired to reach for her taut neck, but instead again followed her gaze.

Somehow, from unseen heights, the sun had found its way inside the clock tower and was bouncing and blanketing the cold metal with its joyous, morning rays.

And yet the light was contained and overwhelmed, held in check by the crowded gears so that only a sprinkle, like glowing dust, reached us at the bottom.

At this strange moment of beauty I felt an undeniable chill as well, and the idea of this darkened place somehow swallowing and overcoming the light of the sun, so that only a tiny stream was allowed, became very unsettling. I suddenly felt the urge to flee the place, and made my feelings known.

"We should not be here," I said, my voice much louder than I had intended. At this, Elise reached out and took my hand in both of hers, placing my hesitant palm on her chest. Her head was tilted downward now and, without raising her chin, she looked at me, eyes piercing.

"But don't you want...?"

That was as much as I heard, for the last of her words were engulfed by my pressing mouth. I knew, throughout the entire entanglement, that what I did was somehow wrong, but I could not summon the reason to believe such a ludicrous thought. She was like nothing I had ever felt, younger and more taut than my wife had been when

first I lay with her. And she resisted, in small ways, pulling away at one moment than thrusting herself passionately forward the next. We did not even have the opportunity to remove our clothing, and I took her there, standing beneath the trickle of sunlight under the heavy, golden gears of the clock tower. When I entered her, she inhaled sharply and I heard a whisper of sound as her maidenhead splashed on the stony ground. I thought little after that.

III

It was less than a week later that I stood in the cemetery, bearing witness to a pale wooden coffin being lowered into the earth. My heart had only five days to sing and feel guilt in turn before word of Elise's death. But I had known before I heard, for that morning, at Dyer Street, she and I had not exchanged smiles. Instead, she looked past me and my visage showed only concern. My fears, begun but days before, were fully founded, as her eyes were now surely sunken, and her cheeks drawn and gaunt. The Brigade found her next morning, lying peacefully before the clock tower.

After the funeral, I visited Carmine, a large, elderly gentleman who was the closest thing to a physician we had in our small town. He informed me, as I had heard from other sources, that the woman had died of natural causes, or possibly a stoppage of her heart. I recounted my fears and concerns over her changing appearance the last few days, but he could not say for sure that loss of weight or gauntness were in any ways symptoms of what had ended her life. I did not, however, recount the coupling that had gone on a week prior, for I feared I had in some way contributed to her death.

There was something strange about the whole experience with Carmine that afternoon. Normally a jovial fellow – though not expected to be on this sad day – his demeanor was quite strained the entire time I questioned him. Firstly, I had never seen a man realign his eyeglasses so many times during one conversation, though I was only inquiring about routine things, nor was there any responsibility being laid at his feet. Yet he acted as if there was something he would not, or could not tell me. With that lasting impression, I chose very quickly, despite my recent lack of good judgement, to act.

Under cover of darkness, and after placing my hand lightly on Druicilla's forehead, I made my way to the cemetery. As I dug up the new grave I had the most horrible thoughts, surely brought on by my surroundings. Had I not gotten entirely what I wanted? The forbidden fruit of this young, beautiful girl was given to me freely, and yet I suffered none of the consequences. Druicilla was unharmed, save for a persistent fever, and I had gotten my deepest desire fulfilled. So why this infatuation that something was so wrong?

I knew why. As I dug fresh, damp earth off the grave of a young girl, I knew. It was that feeling, that cold closeness I had sensed despite the light of the sun. Something in the clock tower, something I had done, had played into the death of this beautiful girl.

After too long, my spade hit wood and I clambered into the grave. My hammer did its work and I soon penetrated the lid of the coffin. Beneath lay my greatest fears realized.

Elise was no longer the beauty she had been mere days before. Her face was shrunken and wrinkled, and her flesh dry as a bone. Her eyes, though giving the impression of protrusion, were in fact empty of fluid, and it was only the sunken pits of the cavities that created the strange illusion. Her arms and hands, as far as I could see

toward the base of the coffin, showed similar effects, the skin crumpled and broken, all hint of moisture gone. She looked as a skeleton would, only wrapped tightly in fine parchment.

I reached out with my hand and gently touched her face, breaking away a section of dried flesh. This caused a chain reaction and the skin fell away as if under a breeze, exposing first her skull, then her cheek and finally her grinning teeth.

I refilled the grave with incredible rapidity and returned home, a different man than when I had left.

IV

The next morning, I found myself staring for some time at the clock tower from my perch across the square. The members of The Brigade were there, but having cleaned the stones around the base of the tower, they seemed hesitant to leave. Perhaps it was just paranoia, but I swore I caught them glancing over at me from time to time, more often than would be considered normal.

I was about to give up on what had become a test of wills when I heard someone's voice coming from the alley to my right. It was Carmine, and he looked panicked, and his eyes wore blackened haloes as if he had received no sleep the night previous. I rose to go toward him and he beckoned to me to be quick. As soon as I reached the alley he turned and was off in a hurry, gesturing for me to follow.

"What happens when life prospers?" he said beneath his breath. I could smell it now, the booze.

"I'm sorry?"

"What happens?" he repeated, now glaring at me as if the answer was somewhere deep in my skull.

"Carmine, I don't – "

"Ssh, shush, never mind," he said, waving at me with utter impatience. "I heard your daughter had a fever? Shall I come by?"

"Well, she keeps telling me it's nothing and that she feels fine. She made me swear not to bother you, but I suppose since you've come to me..."

"Fine, fine," the large man said, looking twice over his shoulder after each word. "You haven't seen my glasses, have you?" he asked, then shook his head to dismiss the question. "Yes, I'll come see her, but I fear I'll not be accomplishing anything in such a visit."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Carmine stopped, blustering from the exertion, and looked around with blatant conspiratorial vigor. "It is you who must help your own kin."

Now I was beginning to grow frustrated, not accustomed to this cryptic type of interaction. "Really, Carmine, I don't understand what you're talking about."

"What happens, do you think? Hmm? When there's no one dying? When the world is a happy little place. When there's no war, or plague or misfortune? No blood, no death?"

He continued on with one more phrase, a phrase that haunts me to this day. It was so strange and yet so accurate to my own fears that I turned and fled the man and his wild, dark eyes that very minute.

I tried to stay away from the clock tower for the rest of the day, even intending to avoid it for the rest of my life if necessary. Plots of moving to another place raced through my head and yet I could not condone such drastic activity based on fear alone. And there was Druicilla to consider, of course. Not only her health, but to alter her life so greatly because of my emerging madness? And I hoped that, I recall. Hoped it was simply madness.

V

My battle ended at twilight and I succumbed to the pull of the clock tower. Looking over my shoulder at every street corner, I made my way to the old beast under the cover of encroaching night. As I pressed my back against its cold marble, a strange thing flared into my mind, like a memory, but passed on through ages. I saw people through time, through various states of war and death, and the one constant, the only constant, was the reverent look on their faces as they gazed upward.

Not surprisingly, the door opened when I tried it and I entered the tower.

There was no sunlight now, but something of the twilight remained, and there was again a small amount of light in the cylindrical base of the tower. I looked up, realizing that the golden coloring on the gears had not in fact come from the filtered sunlight; the gears themselves were golden, bright and grotesque in the gathering dark.

It struck me now just how many gears there were. Dozens upon dozens filling the tower as far up as the eye could see; all golden, all running with a smooth, mesmerizing efficiency. It should have been amazing, an almost magical place; but it wasn't. The

sliding of the metal, the way cogs met other cogs, the way they joined each other with complete precision; it was sexual and malevolent. The whole machination was an orgy of sinister timing and friction. To look up into that cacophony of silence was to understand the point of its existence. It was made to go on and on, constructed to keep moving and turning; but for what?

I shook my head, knowing there were things here, concepts and rules, philosophy beyond my learning. What I knew for sure was it had to stop. With visions of flame and destruction in my mind I turned and plunged for the door, but it was locked somehow. I checked around the edges of the door but I could find no seam. The door was simply no longer passable.

I turned back to the blackness and saw the last of the day alight on the floor in the center of the room. I walked, as if mesmerized, toward the dark patch on the floor, the stain that Elise had left behind. I knelt and brushed my fingers against its rough surface, dragging up flakes of blood with my fingertips.

And I knew. As if I had always known but it had been supplanted by life; by knowledge, by history, by joy and routine. I knew the truth of the clock tower and wherein its malevolence lay.

The clock tower gave you what you wanted.

I looked at my hand and there was no blood. On the floor, no stain remained. I turned, composed, and walked slowly to the door. This time, I was allowed passage out into the world.

As soon as I cleared the door, I ran. It had not defeated me. I had held my emotions in check, but now I planned my revenge and it was one of flame and blood. I

would tear the tower down, stone by stone, golden gears rended from each other, one by one. As I ran through the night, Carmine's final phrase that morning, that one phrase, sang in my head and fueled me.

VI

I arrived back home, thinking nothing of what may await me. The evil of the tower had played itself out before me and I had not the time to indulge in a father's worries that day.

Carmine was there, in my house, looking as haggard as he had that morning. I instantly recognized the posture of a man who had been crying, having sat in such a position for many years after the death of my wife. Beneath Carmine's blackened eyes, I saw the all too familiar wetness.

"What? Did you check her? Is she okay?" I ran past, not waiting for his answers.

Druicilla lay upon her bed, the blanket pulled to her chin. She seemed to be wearing a wooden mask, so dry and taut were her features. Her skin was as pale as the marble of the clock tower; her skull shone through her face as if she were covered in a light, diaphanous cloth. I broke down then and found myself on my knees sometime later, splashes of tears on the floor beneath me.

"It's what you wanted," a voice came from behind me.

I turned and saw Carmine in the doorway.

"Since Mariah died, it's what you wanted," he continued. "Freedom to do what you choose, freedom from this responsibility of fatherhood, freedom to pursue life, like you did with the Porter girl."

"I didn't want this," I yelled.

"The clock tower only gives you what you want," he said. He turned and left before I could say more; nor was there any more to say.

I lay on the floor for a long time, until sleep finally took me.

VII

I said nothing, let alone taking fire and courage to the base of the clock tower. I knew from the minute the beast had shown me the stain on the floor, that it had been my doing. Evil as old as that cannot reach out and grasp you; it needs denizens, fools willing to offer themselves up, willing to spill blood and passion and desire at its feet.

And so I leave you with the tale and the tale alone, but there is of course one last thing to disclose. The thing that was said, the words Carmine uttered as if he were responsible for writing them in blood, his face revealing a responsibility as old as human kind and his eyes hiding the secret of our seemingly peaceful village.

His words I now pass on to you.

"What happens when the clock tower needs to be fed?"