

Clocked

One thing my father and I never shared was his enviable ability to put his head down on the pillow and be asleep in moments. I never fell asleep quickly. Nor did I easily stay asleep. Any tiny noise in the house always interrupted my lightly sleeping brain. Why my cerebral cortex ignored big noises, but became alarmed over small ones has always mystified me and whoever I slept with.

So, when my father took up a new hobby sometime during my freshman year at a local college, an unfortunate result was the disturbance of my slumber by the light ticking of the first pendulum shelf clock he rebuilt. My mother's cousin Gene, who began rebuilding old clocks when he retired the year before, started Dad off in his new hobby with the dead carcass of an old clock and some sound advice.

"Have your eyes checked," said Gene, now a retired pest exterminator. "Those tiny parts are hard to see, but at least they don't squirm around," he said. "Or sting you."

Dad spent weeks on his first project, rebuilding the mechanism and finally re-finishing the clock's walnut case with three coats of lacquer. When it was thoroughly dry, he proudly carried the clock up from his workbench in the basement and put it on the mantel in our living room. After sliding it this way and that to center it perfectly over the fire irons, he opened the little door on the front of the clock, wound the mechanism and gave a little shove to the pendulum.

The clock seemed annoyingly loud to me and I could hear it in the background while we watched television in the living room. When everyone went to bed and the house became quiet, the incessant ticking and tocking of the damned thing was like an air raid siren going off in the living room. I tossed and turned and wrapped a pillow around my head. I felt like I was being tortured by the North Koreans as my Uncle Jimmy had been. But he survived. I would die of exhaustion by morning. This was a classic case of survival of the fittest. Either me or the clock had to go. I decided to kill it.

My first thought was to strangle the beast and hide the body in the basement. Then I'd leave the

front door ajar as if a thief had snuck in. It seemed unlikely anyone would steal only a clock and leave the silver service untouched, so I wasn't sure this scheme would fool anyone. I could also steal our silver and even the Infant of Prague statue. But I'd never heard of any clocks stolen in our neighborhood, and for certain no Infants of Prague ever went missing. And come to think of it, since I didn't have my own apartment, what would I do with a silver service and an Infant of Prague?

The thief in the night scheme was probably no more sophisticated than simply taking my brother's baseball bat to the clock and pleading insanity by way of a strange dream that made me do it. Eventually I had a better idea as I lay there sleepless. I would poison the clock, making it so sickly my father would become frustrated and throw it out or leave it to sit quietly on the mantel.

After everyone in the house was asleep, I tiptoed into the living room, opened the little door on the clock and stopped the pendulum. Then I moved the hands ahead to 3 a.m. so it would appear the clock gave up the ghost long after we were all in bed.

At breakfast I could see disappointment on my father's face as he expressed frustration over the clock's apparent cardiac arrest.

"It never stopped during the test shot ... not once," he said. "I let it run the entire week that I was finishing the cabinet."

"Well, it's old," I said. "Give it a rest, like Grandpa."

"Grandpa's dead," he said.'

"Well, that's what I mean. Honored in life, but more so in death. A quiet memory is best. Either in the ground or on a mantel."

In the evening Dad hustled the clock over to Gene's and the two men thoroughly inspected every tiny component and re-made each adjustment to perfection. That night I got up and stopped the clock again, shoving the hands ahead as though it stopped sometime before dawn.

When I rose the following morning, Dad was on the phone.

"Gene," I heard him say, "the clock made it to 4 o'clock this morning. We did something right last night. We're gaining on the problem!"

My father and Gene spent another six hours that night re-adjusting just about every tension spring and turn screw in the clock, I got up and stopped it again after midnight, but this time I set the hands ahead to only 2:30.

The next morning at breakfast my father was devastated, a haggard look across his face, full of worry and concern for his first big clock project.

Myself, I was feeling quite chipper and refreshed after a full two nights of restful sleep.

"I don't know what I'm doing wrong," said Dad. "The clock only made it to 2:30 last night. Now we're going backward. We've made things worse."

"But maybe," I said and paused for a beat, "pendulum clocks won't run in this house. You know, like maybe the earth's lines of magnetic flux just are not good for a pendulum here. Remember the time all the apples fell off the tree out back? Bad flux, I'm thinking, for anything hanging ... or swinging. You know?"

Dad didn't appear to be listening.

"I'm not sure if Gene really knows what he's doing," he said to no one in particular. "Maybe I'll take it in to work. Herbie the maintenance guy is a mechanical wizard. Maybe he can help."

Dad told us later that Dr. Herbie conducted an unbiased exam of the patient and pronounced the time piece hale and hearty. But after my father's insistence the clock was sick, Herbie thought a minute and said maybe it wasn't sitting on the mantel perfectly level.

"I mean *perfectly*," he told Dad. "Take this six foot mason's level home tonight and line it up so you're sure the clock is *perfectly* level." Herbie might as well have suggested Dad line it up with the North Star for all the good it would do.

This night, Dad performed all the checks and re-checks on the clock downstairs on his workbench. He made no mention of Gene. Then he very carefully carried the patient up to our living room. On the mantel he placed the long mason's level, a device with the width and thickness of a pack of cards, but six feet long. Embedded in the level was a bubble that told you when things were perfectly horizontal. When the instrument and C-clamps and various holding tools were arranged on the mantel, he placed the clock precariously on top and jiggled it a bit to make sure it wouldn't fall off. Then, down at the far end of the mantel, he *very* carefully slid a pack of matches under the six foot mason's tool and moved it toward the clock until the bubble pronounced everything true. He used the clamps to hold all the parts in place.

This was the carefully balanced pile confronting me when in semi darkness I stepped into the living room around midnight to continue my regimen of clock poisoning.

Even if I managed to not make a mistake and cause the assemblage to come crashing down from the mantel, I wasn't sure I could remove the clamps

and then open the clock in the dark without making a noise that might wake the household.

"You made one dumb mistake," came a stage whisper from behind me.

I turned to see my mother sitting in her chair across the room.

"Was it the goofy theory about the earth's lines of flux?" I asked.

"No, I didn't hear that one," she said, "but it sounds like something your father would believe."

"How did you know it was me?" I asked.

"I've been following you around since you began to walk," she continued. "You leave a trail as wide as an elephant's behind you."

"A trail of what?" I asked.

"Everything," she said. "Toys, books, magazines, cookie crumbs, last week's homework, hair combs, socks, shoes, shirts, Aqua Velva ..."

"OK, OK," I interrupted. "What did I leave on the mantel?"

"Nothing," she said. "Specifically, not your car keys."

"My car keys ..." We left our keys on the mantel at night so cars could be moved if anyone needed to get out of the narrow driveway early the next morning.

"When I didn't see them on the mantel," she said, "I guessed why you didn't leave them."

"I needed the little flashlight on the keychain to get back to bed ..."

"... without tripping over the coffee table or a hassock," she said.

"That's pretty smart, Mom," I said. "So now, how will I get to sleep after Dad finds out what I've been doing?"

"He won't find out," she said. "You keep stopping that noisy clock every night and I'll hold the pillow against his ear like I've been doing. Eventually, we'll wear him down. He'll find another hobby and we'll get some sleep."



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