

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 less time than it took him to clean his false teeth. And he was pretty fast at that chore, since he did them while showering, placing both uppers and lowers on the soap shelf where the spray hit them when he moved out of the way.

Myself, I never fell asleep quickly and any tiny noise in the house would interrupt my lightly sleeping brain. Why my cerebral cortex will ignore big noises while becoming alarmed over small ones has always mystified me and whoever I slept with.

So, when my father took up a hobby sometime during my last year of high school, 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 sometimes 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.

It 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 to my ears like an air raid siren going off in the living room. I tossed and turned and wrapped my pillow around my head and felt like I was being tortured by the North Koreans as my Uncle Jimmy had been, except he survived. I was not going to survive the night, but 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 clock and hide the body in the basement. Then I'd leave the front door ajar as if a thief had snuck in and stolen it. But since it seemed unlikely anyone would steal only a clock and leave the silver service untouched, I wasn't sure this scheme would fool anyone, not even if I included the silver and added the Infant of Prague statue, which I would not miss as much my mother would miss her silver. I'd never heard of any clocks stolen in our neighborhood, anyway, and for certain no Infants of Prague ever went missing. And come to think of it, since I would be the thief and I didn't have my own apartment, what would I do with a silver service and an Infant of Prague except to put them right back where they came from. 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.

Then I had a great idea as I lay there sleepless. I would poison the clock, making it so sickly my father would get frustrated and either 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 door on the clock and stopped the pendulum. Then I moved the hands ahead to 3 a.m. so it would look like 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 I was finishing the cabinet."

"Well, it's old," I said. "Give it a rest and restart it tonight."

That evening Dad took the clock over to Gene's and the two men thoroughly inspected every component of the clock and re-made each adjustment to perfection. That night I got up and stopped the clock again, shoving the hands ahead so it looked like it stopped sometime before dawn.

When I got up 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!"

That night after my father and Gene spent another six hours re-adjusting just about every spring tension 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. I could see the haggard look on his face, full of worry and concern for his first big clock project. Myself, I was feeling quite refreshed and chipper 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, making things worse.”

“Maybe,” I said after pausing for a beat, “that particular clock won’t run in this house. You know, like maybe the earth’s lines of magnetic force 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, maybe, 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.”

If Dr. Herbie had been conducting an unbiased exam of the patient, he would have pronounced the time piece hale and hearty. But after my father’s insistence that 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 Pole 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 removed the clock from the mantel, replacing it with the long mason’s level, a device with the dimensions of a pack of cards, except that it was six feet long. Embedded in the level was a bubble that told you when things were perfectly horizontal. When he had the instrument and the C-clamps and various holding tools situated on the mantel, he set 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. Then 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 without making a noise that might wake the household.

“You made one dumb mistake,” said a voice 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?” 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, bottles and then 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 key chain.”

How stupid could I get? For the past year I’d been leaving my key chain on the mantel before I went to bed, in case someone needed to move my old jalopy in the middle of the night so they could get out of the driveway. We were constantly moving cars around before my older brother recently left for the service. The past few nights I hadn’t left it because in the dark I needed the tiny flashlight on the keychain to get me back to my room without falling over the coffee table or a hassock.

“That’s pretty smart, Mom,” I said. “So now, how am I going to get to sleep when 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 over his ear to cover any noise you make, just like I’ve been doing. Eventually, we’ll wear him down and we’ll both get some sleep.”

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