

Sheila Longton

Byron at 6:15

There's a clock, ticking away inside me like a bomb set to explode, to propel me screaming into the vast unknown. A timer to mark off each phase of my life—12 hours of childhood, 12 hours of adolescence—reset after each midnight's final bong, rewound to high noon, the beginning of another stage. Boom! Eerie atomic flash like fireworks and I'm shot forward, ready for the next scene. A bright shadowless rebirth, violent and frightening. I have so far always arrived whole—no shattered bones or missing limbs—landed intact and sprung to my feet.

I could have loved you, Byron, but I met you at 6:15. I'd been thrust out of childhood carrying the brand-new baggage of breasts and periods, the only injuries a pimple or two. By 6:00 I'd dumped the zits, traded them in for hips and newly rounded thighs. I was 16, looked 20, but it wasn't time yet.

You were somewhere between nine and midnight, your fuse mostly ash, an inch, maybe two, left sizzling. Warnings of danger flashed, sparks licked at your beard, burned the flesh of your chest, ignited your manhood smouldering beside me, ready to burst, in your single bed. You were 19, about to explode.

"Marry me."

"No."

"Live with me then."

"Maybe."

I wanted you. But I couldn't trick the clock, couldn't move it forward to synchronize with yours. Our timing was off and I had to wait through

five hours of dolts and dandies till the alarm sounded and I was hurtled forward again.

He's stirring, Byron, crumpling a corner of limp pillowcase in his hand. I sit by and watch, a spectator, unmoved.

Maybe it's normal, this clock. Maybe everyone's got one. A baby crawls for hours, the second hand sweeps the dial and—whoosh!—he stands. You're reading to him one night and the next morning—whoosh!—he's reading to you. Whoosh and he won't kiss you anymore. Whoosh again and he smells bad—rotten—sprouts a single facial hair like a potato's long wiry root and roller blades away.

My clock's a good one, accurate to the minute. It doesn't gain or lose so I don't ever wonder where the time went and have to go look for it. I was always a good girl, didn't walk before I could crawl, never dropped out before finishing, wasn't pregnant at 16. And I didn't stay with you.

It was early in the next cycle that I found someone else, Byron. I thought he was like you.

I sit here, my eyes level with the clean chrome bed, the high white hospital bed, and watch him die—could take two weeks, maybe three. He's only 40, Byron, his clock's all bugged, winding down too fast, spinning round and round. Words and scrambled thoughts sproing out of him like springs popping—boing boing boing. One minute he's an old man, feeble, thin and yellowing, his lips cracked and pale, his skin dry, lying helpless, staring into his doom. Sometimes then he's wistful, dreaming the good old days, asking "Do you remember?" The next minute he's babbling nonsense, a babe wanting to be coddled, needing his diaper changed, dipping into the smelly brown prize like finger paint for play. Cuckoo.

Sometimes he rants, full of spleen and fury about injustices and God. A grain of sand is gumming up the works, the tumor in his brain throwing everything out of whack. The wheels clog and grind to a halt. Then the pea-sized nugget slips and the wheels spin, skittering fast, the cogs broken, slithering unchecked.

I swear I can see it happening. The flutter of his eyelids, the sluggish loll of his dark fuzzy tongue. Something inside him still fights it, some ghostlike spirit rises, arching his scrawny neck, every twisted rope, each stiffened cord exposed and vulnerable, his head thrashing valiantly against

the bank of pillows. Or maybe it's just some chemical thing, an involuntary twitching of nerves.

I used to cheer him, join him in the rallying battle and urge those spasms on. But now I have to stop myself from smothering him with the sweat and saliva-damp pillows, the ones the nurses fluff and adjust at 20 minute intervals when they check the IV.

Why doesn't he just die? Let the wheel spin out and enter the last stage—a new day with no dusk, no evening shadows. I wish he'd let go, let the time be noted, stamped and signed.

We met at a party like couples are supposed to, a tale for the grandchildren. He looked so much like you! But the party and our meeting were dull, no story there.

The first time you approached me, sidled up to where I sat filling out the mundane forms, tilted my chair back dangerously and cushioned my head in your thighs, I was flustered, feigned indignity at the intrusion, protested as bitchily as I knew how. Until our eyes met and I saw the sparkle there, the fun, felt the warmth of your magnificent smile. That excited me. I cattily offered to do your form for you if only you'd let me go. I touched the pencil stub to my tongue, waved the HB around with a flourish and asked your name. "Byron. Byron Bland." I looked questioningly over the top of my glasses, printed it in block letters—BLAND BYRON—and teased you, flirting, about the false portent there.

Our first date Dan took me to a concert. Some pimply-faced pianist, a prodigy with impressive technique but no soul. Another clock buggered? Accomplished too soon and a Mozart death at 35?

You and I danced in the moonlight, the muffled strains of Big Band music wafting through the open gym doors. How we twirled on the damp lawn—ballerina and partner, saddleshoe jitterbug duo, high-stepping Charleston champs. Turned a street lamp into spotlight and did Shakespeare in the park. Switched to TV and yammered Gracie and George, fought Alice and Ralph, mocked Laura and Rob. Until mosquitoes rose from the green turf in a cloud, blocked our nostrils and bounced off our foreheads, punishing us for our frivolity, forcing us back into the crowded gym where the air was hot and stale with gyrating teens. We tried to join in, tried to mimic the rest, but there was no magic for us in that cloying air or the stomping, wiggling, ordinary dance.

You led me away, took me by the hand and walked me through a labyrinth of passageways to the kitchen. It was forbidden, in darkness, and still so hot the air hit the back of my throat like the first toke of a strong cigarette. Sweat pasted my blouse to my breasts and tacked your shirt to your back. Perspiration ran down our faces, stung our eyes. You made a showy ceremony of presenting me with my trophy—the fridge—opened it and held me to you in the cool white light. Cupping my ears in your palms, fondling my lobes, my flushed cheeks, the fine bones of my jaw with your calloused thumbs, you kissed me. You were a great kisser, Byron, the best.

I'm kissing him now, brushing my #5 Tangerine lips dutifully over his chapped, senseless ones. I don't remember before, can't visualize the sturdy, vigorous man I married, have confused his lovemaking with yours.

Scrabbling over each other's bodies in the back of your van. Rolling, wrestling, tearing frantically at buttons and buckles, hooks, zippers, and snaps. The thrill of your thumbnail catching in the stiff lace of my brassiere, the gasp as your fingers found a nipple, the shudder as your mouth tasted the skin between my breasts. Kisses soft as summer rain, fat fluffy raindrops spotting my belly and back, a smell sweet like watered earth.

He smells awful, sour and acrid like bad meat, green-tinged and foul. I used to bathe him, dip the sponge into the metal bowl and pat his face with warm soapy water, work down his chest, caress his groin, scrub his firm, muscular legs, heave him over and massage his back and buttocks ruddy with heavy, cleansing strokes. But I can't do it anymore, can't stand the sight of his decay, the skeletal remains. At precisely nine a.m. a nurse will do it. A big-faced clock in the hall reminds her.

The same white clinical clocks are everywhere here. They are present in the delivery rooms, silent witness to the agony of labor, recording the exact time of birth. Whoosh!—a gush of blood and the baby is shot as from a cannon out of the womb, down the birth canal to face the clock. Boing!—the entrail-like umbilicus a bungee cord, stayed for a moment by the anchored, liver-like placenta while the newborn chokes and sputters, the engine catches and roars.

We had two babies three floors down. "A girl for you, a boy. . . ." Two point four five if you count the limbless mass I aborted spon-

taneously. Spontaneously—at 7:39 p.m. I sobbed inconsolably the appropriate hour and a half, grieved the usual six months, still mourn once every 365 days. Nobody bothered with the specifics of all that—"within normal range"—clocked and charted only the emergence of the seal-like thing.

Time is all important here, though as I sit hour after hour, day after day, weeks piling into months in this green vinyl chair, I can't see it, can't feel its divisions anymore. The staff are still subject to it, never misread the clock, stay fixed to its clear round dial. Here the big-faced clocks determine everything, work shifts and routine, the handing out of pills and the taking of samples—urine and stool, blood and marrow. Tick—"Time for your medication, Mr. Jones." Tick—"I must take your temperature *now*, Mrs. Brown." Tick tick—"I'm off for lunch, back in an hour."

It's all a blur, the clocks, the sausage-linked figures on my watch, the green blinking numbers of the VCR. Time surrounds me like those damned mosquitoes of our distant summer night. I can't breathe with it, can't see. But there's no open door, nowhere I can go, no secret sacred place except in my mind. I want to flee, but I'm stuck to the green vinyl chair.

You left me on a street corner in the middle of an Edmonton blizzard, couldn't wait for the thaw. Before, at the party, you got drunk, donned a leather aviator's cap and played departing war ace, made a speech about flying, risking it all, then kissed everyone tearfully on both cheeks and led me out into the cold. My coat flapped, undone in the screaming wind that took my breath away and hurt my breasts. But I wouldn't drop my hand from yours to fasten up, wanted you to be holding my fingers in your crusty mitten forever.

"It's not working." Your words whistled in the icy winds stinging my face. Something fizzled in my chest.

"But. . . ."

"Maybe in five years."

"Oh please!" I begged, hugging your arm against my chest, wiping my nose in the stiff creases of your parka sleeve.

"In five years maybe," your kiss was so tender and soft, salt-sticky and cold, "we'll try again."

* * *

I tried to find you, heard you were living with someone named Valerie in North Van, working as a janitor, sweeping out shopping malls.

I suppose, in a way, that Dan and I are breaking up. He's packed his things, moved out, is leaving me. I'm angry and I hate him for it—wanted to have some say in the timing.

It isn't fair. Dan doesn't have a chance, my memories of him are so diseased. When he asks "Do you remember?," I have to lie.

But in my mind you're not even wrinkled with age. I imagine you brandishing that janitor's broom like a dancer's cane, singing with it in the empty echoing halls, full-voiced and laughing. Forever youthful, preserved, a shiny clock on my mantel stopped somewhere between nine and midnight.