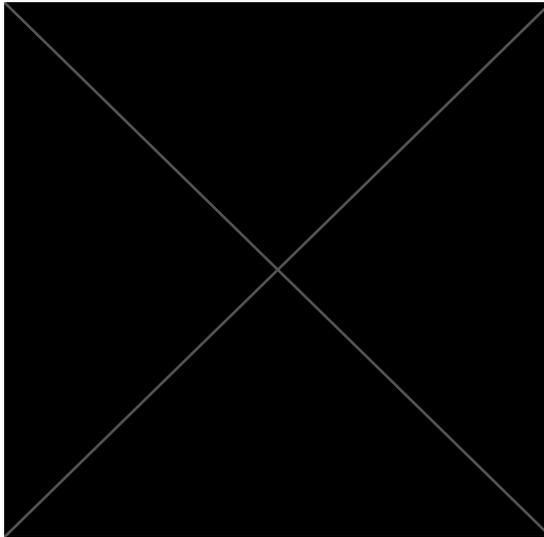


**The Boy and the Clock**

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Word Count: 2932



George crept quietly along the worn wooden floor as he made his way around the corner and down the hall. Fortunately for George, his creaking footsteps were disguised by the rumblings of the old house, an old house that had stood as long as time itself, as far as George was concerned.

It had been built by his great-great-grandfather long ago in the countryside, and within these walls his great-grandfather, grandfather, and father had all been raised. George, however, had not been raised here. No, he had spent his eight years of life in the bustling city, where excitement lived around every corner and a constant energy filled the air. He loved the city and could not wait to return.

He continued his creeping as he slowly made his way down the stairs, cringing at each step as a soft creaking sound issued from beneath his foot. At each creak he would pause, sure that at any moment someone would burst from a room to scold him for being awake so late. But no such scolding came, and he continued carefully down the stairs.

At last, he reached the bottom of the stairs. Before his eyes, with the light of the moon streaming through the windows and illuminating it like a glorious artifact of some ancient civilization, stood a magnificent grandfather clock. George had never seen such a thing in his life. Ever since they had arrived at the home and it first caught his eye, his mind had been fixed upon it. There had, however, been little time to stop and admire, for they had not arrived for a casual visit. In fact, this was George's very first time visiting his grandparents' home, and a rather somber visit it was. You see, George's grandfather had just died.

For George, it was a strange time, for he had hardly known his grandfather. In his eight years of life, George had never even left the city. To now find himself in an old creaking home in the middle of nowhere was strange to say the least. He was trying to make the best of it, but he

was beginning to feel rather lonely. All the adults were occupied with each other, there were no other children his age, and there was little to do. He missed the city, he missed his friends, and he missed all the people. He sighed as he sat in front of the great clock, wondering how much longer he would have to stay out here in the dreadful countryside.

His eyes rested upon the great swinging pendulum of the clock, its motion steady and rhythmic, the gentle ticking sounding in his ears. Warm summer air from opened windows blew through the hallway, and George felt his eyelids begin to grow heavy. He made an initial fight to stave off the onset of sleep, but eventually succumbed, curling up on the warm wooden floor as the ticking of the clock lulled him into a deep slumber. Dreams flashed through his mind, invisible to all but George. Then, as suddenly as he had fallen asleep, George found himself jolted awake by a loud chime. His eyes shot open, searching for the source of the chime. What he saw gave him quite a shock.

No longer did George find himself in the hallway of his grandparents' old house. He found himself in a little forest clearing, daylight streaming through the branches overhead. George also found that he was no longer dressed in his pajamas. He was now wearing a light cotton shirt, thick trousers, and a pair of sturdy boots. Confused and a bit scared, George stood up and began to call for his mother and father.

“Hello! Who goes there!” cried a young voice through the trees.

“Help! I seem to be lost, and I can't find my parents!” yelled George back in the direction of the voice. He looked anxiously through the woods as the sound of cracking branches and rustling leaves filled the air. Then, a small figure burst through the brush and into the clearing, his face beaming as he panted heavily. He bore a large stick in his hand, a heavy pack upon his back, and a wide smile upon his tanned face.

“Hello there!” he exclaimed brightly. “I’m Oliver, what’s your name?”

“I... I’m George,” replied George cautiously. The boy looked oddly familiar, yet he couldn’t tell why.

“Well, George, it’s sure nice to meet you, even if you are lost! By the way, how did you get lost anyways?”

“I don’t know. I was at my grandparents’ house, I fell asleep in the hallway, and then I was here.”

“That’s odd, isn’t it? Well, who are your parents, anyways? It’s a small town here, I’ll bet I’ve heard of them.”

“Oh I’m not from here, I’m from the city.”

“The city? Really? I’ve never met anyone from the city before!”

How backwards was this place, really, thought George. Never been to the city? He nearly scoffed, but thought better of it in the moment.

“Yes, the city. I’m here just to visit. My grandfather just died.”

A look of dismay and genuine pity spread across the face of the other boy as George relayed this sad news.

“Ah gee, I’m sorry to hear that. I hadn’t heard anyone had died. What’s the last name?”

“Thomas.”

“Thomas? That’s my last name! But I don’t know any other Thomas family around here, and last I remember, no one in my family had died. You’re sure it’s Thomas?”

“Yes I’m sure, it’s my own last name, after all,” replied George, beginning to feel rather annoyed by this line of questioning. “I was staying at an old white house with a blue door, it had a gold door knocker attached to it. Does that sound familiar at all?” George asked this question

with an air of condescension, trying to be as specific as possible so this backwards boy could perhaps understand. As he described the house, though, Oliver's face dropped and a puzzled look crossed his brow.

“Familiar? Of course it's familiar, you just described my house,” Oliver said in a suspicious tone.

George now found himself growing confused, and he looked more closely at the boy before him. Yes, he was sure, he had seen that face before... but where?

“What kind of game is this, huh? Who are you, really? Are you messing with me?” Oliver continued sternly. As his face changed, George at last had a clear memory enter his mind. He knew now where he had seen this face! His grandmother had been showing him old family pictures just the day prior, and in one picture stood a serious looking boy about his age. When he had asked who that boy was, his grandmother had told him it was his grandfather when he was George's age. But then that meant what? That Oliver, the boy before him, was his grandfather? How could that be even remotely possible? Yet it had to be so. This boy had the same hair, the same eyes, even the same distinctive scar about his left eyebrow. George nearly fell over at this stunning revelation.

“Well? Are you going to answer me? Who are you?”

“What do you have in your hallway?” George asked suddenly. An idea had sprung into his mind, a way to further confirm his suspicions.

“What? What kind of question is that?” shot back Oliver. He was clearly getting frustrated with the strange boy from the city.

“I think I know what's going on, but I need you to tell me what's in the hallway at your house,” repeated George. Oliver eyed him suspiciously now as he replied slowly.

“A grandfather clock that my father made for us. Why?”

That was all the confirmation George needed.

“Well then this is just a dream! I just fell asleep in front of that old clock, and when I woke up, I was here. That means you’re my grandfather! I saw a picture of you in an old book of family photos my grandmother was showing me. This is all just a dream!” George exclaimed with relief. It all made sense now!

To Oliver, however, it did not seem to make much sense at all. He began to move closer to George, a strange look in his eyes, when he suddenly raised the stick in his hand, bringing it down swiftly upon George’s head.

“Ouch! What was that for?” cried George in pain as he rubbed his head.

“You’re not in a dream, see? Otherwise you would have woken up! And I’m quite certain I would know if this was a dream, too, and it’s not. So, what’s really going on here?”

George could not argue with this logic. He was now more puzzled than ever.

“Hmmm... I guess, I’m not sure then,” he replied.

“But you still think I’m your grandfather? I mean, how? We’re the same age!”

Oliver was right, they were the same age. It wasn’t a dream. Yet George was absolutely sure this was the same boy from the picture! And how had he ended up here in the middle of a forest?

“I don’t think, I know. I remember clear as day that picture, I just don’t remember how I got here. Like I said, I just remember falling asleep in front of that old clock.”

An idea seemed to jumpstart Oliver, for he leapt forward with a newfound excitement in his eyes and looked at George now with wonder.

“I know what happened! It’s just like a book I just read, or sort of, anyways. Why, don’t you see? You time traveled! That means... oh wow, you’re from the future!”

It dawned upon George at this moment that Oliver’s conclusion was most likely correct, and he had underestimated the intellect of this simple country boy.

“What’s it like in the future? You said you’re visiting for your grandfather’s funeral... wait, that means me! Oh man... Well, how old am I gonna be? And how many kids do I have? Oh I have so many questions...”

Oliver was all sorts of worked up by this new revelation, but as the questions poured out, George remembered something from one of his own books, in his time.

“Wait... I don’t think I can answer those questions,” he said slowly, thoughtfully.

“What? Why not? I want to know all about my future!”

“Well, that’s just it... if you know about your future, won’t that mess with it? I remember a book I read, too, and if anyone changed anything in the past, it changed the future.”

This made Oliver grow silent, and he seemed to be thinking hard about this possibility.

“But then, wouldn’t you being here change the future? I mean, how do we know that in the future I didn’t already have this conversation?”

An intriguing point, thought George. Now his head was hurting.

“Well... you may be right about that.”

“Of course I’m right, I’m your grandfather, after all!” grinned Oliver. George could not help but smile back, and for the first time since he had awoken, he was no longer scared.

“I guess so! Well, then, ask away!” replied George, and the two boys set off through the woods, Oliver peppering George with all sorts of questions about the future. They climbed over rocks, crossed streams, and pushed their way through thick undergrowth as George told Oliver

about his future children, his wife, how old he would live to be, and really as much as George could tell until they paused on a lone hilltop for a brief rest. Both boys had scratched arms, sweaty brows, and wide smiles. Oliver sat with a furrowed brow for a moment, his eyes looking out in the distance.

“What do you say we go on an adventure?” Oliver asked suddenly.

“What kind of adventure?” George asked with interest.

“Well, if we head down this hill in that direction and keep going, we’ll eventually get to the sea. We could pretend we’re... pirates! Pirates escaped from prison who are trying to make their escape to the sea! So, what do you say, Captain George?”

George didn’t even need to think about it before he enthusiastically agreed. Thus the two boys set off through the woods on their grand adventure to reach an imagined pirate ship filled with all sorts of treasure. They ducked under bushes and waded through streams, moving stealthily through the forest. Hollowed out logs provided cover for when soldiers sounded nearby, their imagined footsteps alerting the daring pirates to their presence. At least three swordfights broke out, each time Oliver and George successfully fighting off their foes. They continued to be pursued as they at last crossed through the forest and into the gently rolling green hills.

George stopped and wondered at how the landscape seemed to go on forever. He felt like he was in a different world entirely from the one he had known his whole life. An immense joy filled his soul to overflowing, and he began to weep.

“What’s wrong, George?” Oliver asked concernedly as the tears flowed freely down George’s cheeks.

“I never knew, I just never knew,” George managed to reply

“Never knew what?”

“I never knew the world could be so beautiful.”

At this, Oliver’s concern melted away and gave way to a broad grin.

“It sure is, George. Now quick, we’ve got a ship to catch!”

With that, Oliver turned and ran into the green hills. With a smile, George followed. He felt as if the cool wind were carrying him as he ran, his feet growing light as the sound of Oliver’s laughter filled the air. As they continued to run, George could now see something shining in the distance beyond the hills of green. It was the vast sea, its surface sparkling beneath a radiant sun. They were no longer returning to some pretend treasure, but a real one that stretched endlessly on and on. George saw brilliant diamonds and sheets of silver as he gazed awestruck upon this most wonderful of prizes.

At last, they reached the soft white sands of the beach, and Oliver cried out in triumph.

“We’ve done it, George! We escaped, we made it to our ship!”

The boys whooped and hollered and cheered as they ran into the sea, its cool water providing instant relief for their tired feet. They then wandered along the beach, filling their pockets with seashells and rocks, items with which to remember their daring escape. After a quick bite to eat from the food Oliver had brought along, they began their journey back home. As they left the beach, then the hills behind, George began to wonder if he would ever again lay eyes upon this land. He doubted it, and a spirit of deep melancholy rested upon him as they marched onward through the woods. There was silence for a time, until at last Oliver spoke.

“Hey George, do you know how you’re going to get back to your time?”

The question struck like an arrow through George’s mind, and the fear he had not felt since he first awakened in the forest returned with force.

“I... no, I don't,” he replied worriedly.

“I'm sure it'll work out, but in the meantime, you need a place to sleep. You'll have to sneak into my room, but you can sleep in my room on my floor,” Oliver replied. The casualness and confidence with which he replied chased away George's fear and worry, and the two began to reminisce upon their exciting adventure as they neared the edge of the forest. As they left the woods behind, George now saw familiar sights before his eyes. Not much had changed from this time to his in the countryside, and he followed Oliver as they made their way to the old house.

“When it's time to come in, I'll give you a sign, ok?” Oliver said as they arrived at the house. George waited as night began to fall upon the earth. He looked out over the darkening landscape, the sunset creating a dazzling display of color before his eyes. He let out a deep sigh as he thought how much he would miss the countryside now once he returned to the city.

George continued to wait as the world grew dark until at last, a knock sounded from a window above his head. He slowly crept in the house, and as he made his way down the hall, he once more stopped before the mysterious grandfather clock. His eyes became fixed upon it, and, without thinking, he sat down upon the floor to admire it. Before he knew it, his eyelids were growing heavy, and he found himself drifting into dreams.

Then, a voice. Was it Oliver? It was growing louder, louder...

“George, George,” said the voice quietly. George felt his shoulder being shook, and he looked up groggily. Looking down at him with a soft expression was his father.

“Let me carry you back up to bed, buddy,” his father said, and he scooped George up in his arms, carrying him up the stairs and back to his room. Laying him in his bed, George felt something hard in his pocket. He reached in and found, to his surprise, a handful of seashells and rocks. Instantly, tears welled in his eyes, and he began to cry.

“I miss grandfather,” he said. He felt his father’s arms wrap tight around him, his voice breaking as he too began to sob.

“Me too, George. Me too.”