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Time Is on My Side

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Author Bio

Bethany Frankel is a junior English major with a writing concentration and has a minor in Peace & Justice Studies. When not writing her novel and drinking copious amounts of coffee, she can be found working on her music or petting dogs. She was born and raised in Delaware, which is, in fact, a state.

Time is on My Side

BETHANY FRANKEL

Open your eyes and all you'll see is gray. Once the world was seen in shades of black and white, but over time, the distinction faded like reels of film losing their clarity from decades of use. It's hard to distinguish between night and day when you glance out the window and you see only yourself reflected back in the cracked glass-- light hair floating around delicate curves and angled edges of a face, set against a backdrop of gray, like all the letters and words in the newspaper ran together.

Stacks of newspapers cover the dining room table, slabs of print piled haphazardly; a strong gust of wind whipping through the house would be enough to spill the contents of time. Clouds of dust drift in the air when you pass, your fingers trailing over the newspaper on the corner. The St. Charles Gazette, September 2, 1883. The air of change in this house has long been broken, the passage of time long forgotten. Everyday is September 2, 1883. Your name is printed on the front page of the paper, the four letters of Mona streaked across the thin page until a residue of ink remains on your fingertips. This is how everyday goes: wake up and wander through the empty house, moving past rooms long unoccupied-- lumps of beds and tables and armoires covered up in a hurry, large fabric sheets fraying into cobwebs-- take an inventory of items to make sure everything remains the same, and always end up in the same place. Everyday leads to you staring at the grandfather clock at the base of the stairs, studying its face like it might reveal something you've forgotten.

The clock is tall enough that it tries to scrape the caving ceiling, rounded on the edges and made of oak from the tree out in the backyard. Somewhere in your memory you can remember standing in the snow, bundled up in your coat red as blood, only your eyes visible in the cold. A man guided your grip on the axe and placed his bare, chapped hands over yours to help you bring the blade down. The wood split with a hearty thunk, the excess branches of the young tree scattered across the ground in perfect parallel lines. Whenever you pass the back window, however, a full oak looms over the house, its canopy spreading arms to shadow the back of the house. Something prickles at your head, possibly the wanting of clear remembrance, but you find your way back to the clock instead.

The clock is the only furniture free of dust, which spirals out in a circle from the base of the tower. Your footprints make perfect indents in the

thick layer, leading to and from the grandfather clock. You trace the path that the man once did, moving from the wood storage in the cellar to the workshop in the attic, back to the final resting place of his masterpiece. The clock he built with only his hands and his genius, matching each gear and coil precisely to his design. The clockface is inlaid with a rendering of the constellations he used to point out to you, with four letters carved in the wood to form the four points of a compass: M, J, A, G. Every September 2 you end up sitting back here, legs crossed and staring up at the clock, wondering why you can hear the clock ticking. The hands haven't moved in years, frozen at 2:56 in the afternoon. The gears have stopped turning, but you can hear the click of something still alive in this machine. The chimes of the clock echoing through the house wake you up every imaginary hour.

The faint whistling of the wind slips between the broken windowpanes, slips beneath the floorboards. You hear her coming up the front walk, tripping over the rose garden that has become a jungle-- dead vines and thorns snake along the ground, waiting to wrap around ankles of trespassers. She curses faintly and it is carried away by the wind and dropped in your lap, silently warning you to move closer to the clock. The heels of her boots click against cobblestone and then stop, a pause before the creak of the porch stairs. The door handle turns and you pull your legs up to your chest.

The intruder is a young woman, the fur collar of her coat drawn up against the chill in the air. Her eyes have the roundness of a doe, freckles smeared across her delicate face. She remains painted in the monochrome gray, though some similarity that strikes you makes you think you catch a flash of red when she tosses her hair behind her. She looks like everyone you have ever seen before combined into a single person, unrememberable and full of meaning. She looks straight at you but doesn't see you.

Her breath clouds the air in front of her as she takes a step towards the clock. The wood presses up against your back but your hands fumble for the texture of the oak and grab at nothing. When she moves towards you, you realize that the footprints you saw before match her shoes. She interrupts the dust and you are composed from it.

"Mona," she whispers, her voice barely audible, amplified only by the emptiness of the house that allows the word to echo. You have become your namesake, drifting through the halls with moans trailing behind like clear, silken strips of fabric, your face as blank as the painting your mother named you after. There's a hint of a smile hiding in the corner of your mouth, stuck between revealing your reactions and concealing them. Much like you-- stuck. Trapped between this life and the next, where time might start again.

Are you my mother? The words drift in the space, but you never opened your mouth. You haven't had the ability to speak in so long that your voice has rusted like the cogs of the clock.

“Mona, if you’re here, I hope you can hear me.” The woman laughs, the nervous sound reminiscent of the grinding of metal against metal that used to shriek from the attic. “I don’t know if you recognize me or know who I am. Your mother was my grandmother.” Her smile gives off enough warmth to forget about the continual cold creeping through the house. “It’s me, Caroline. Janie’s daughter.”

You shrink back against the clock. The names sound familiar but don’t make sense together-- when you hear the name Janie, all that comes to mind is a child with vicious curls, huddled over the latest letter from your uncle on the Union front lines, speaking in the halting language that comes with learning to read. The woman that stands in front of you--Caroline--looks like what would have happened to Janie if she got older, but that would mean...

“I brought something for you,” she says, growing more confident in her voice. She makes eye contact with you but isn’t aware of it. Bending down slowly, she unties her coat to reveal a newspaper rolled neatly. She unfurls it and leaves it at the edge of the dust-free circle as an offering.

If you had a longer life, this is what you’d wish for: to see your name on the cover of *The St. Charles Gazette* without the word “obituary” preceding it. To feel the warmth of the woodstove on your cheek once more. To understand why Caroline smiles at you like she can’t see you when you are right here. The newspaper offering tells you that contractors have bought the deed to the Evers Mansion and plan to turn it into a museum; they want the reconstruction to be finished in three years to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the state’s first unsolved murder case. The child was found on the staircase, a rough oak board dangling from her fingertips, splinters embedded into her palms. On her tongue was a single clock gear. The paper reads 1955. You can’t find the date of September 2 anywhere you look.

One look from Caroline and you know: you have been plunged into an eternal winter and broken clocks don’t make good company. It doesn’t take long to calculate the difference between 1883 and 1955. Caroline’s voice is quiet when she confirms it: “You’ve been dead for 72 years, Mona.”

The newspaper in your hands crashes to the ground with a thud. Caroline jumps back, but quickly recovers. She digs in her jacket and draws out the other contents of her person: a box of matches. The smile has been wiped from her face. She strikes a match against the box, holding it delicately between her thumb and index finger. If your heart still had the ability to beat, it would slam against your decayed ribs as she reaches the lit match towards the clock. You slam an invisible hand to the glass panel hiding the clock’s chimes and the surface cracks with a layer of frost. Caroline jumps back in fright and drops the match, but the wind whips through the house and two things happen at once: there is the sound of dozens of newspapers fluttering

through the air, and the match rolls under the base of the old, dry clock. One kiss of flame is all it takes.

You can feel the heat as soon as the flames touch the surface of the clock. One match and warmth swells from your stomach, radiates from your center to the tips of your fingers and toes. You sigh and the pattern of ice on the clock's glass crystallizes, meets the fire in a moment of deadly flirtation, and explodes. Shards of glass rocket through the front room and Caroline dives towards the ground. You whip around to see the constellations melt towards the dusty ground, the initials of the compass drooping towards the center of the inferno. You are so focused on the destruction of your private altar that you almost don't notice that the flames have transferred to you, climbing from your ankles up your body like a choking vine of ivy. Every part of you that the fire touches flashes back to its original color before disappearing. You forgot that the spots on your arms were not freckles but bloodstains.

When you look down at your hands and the fire that consumes them, you remember a little bit about the girl you used to be. You wore that red coat in the snow until your mother told you to come inside. She didn't want you to catch hypothermia. What she didn't take into consideration was how fascinated you would be by your father's inventions. No matter how many times she warned you to leave him alone while he was working, you wanted to help him build the clock. You once asked him if he would put a part of you in it. It was going to be a secret between you and him, a drop of blood on the central gear, the one that makes time move forward. You wanted the imaginary power to control time.

Open your mouth and a gear will fall out. You smile and it melts against your tongue. You see the red tint to the clock as it begins to vanish. You see the red of the flames as they lick your body like the softest embrace. The last thing you see is the minute hand of the clock creaking forward.