

Frozen Clocks and False Carnations

Maybe three years ago was when that old clock stopped ticking. Nat knows it was just a dead battery; she tried to fix it once with Dad. As young as she was, she remembers stretching her tiny arms like vines along a clocktower. Dad said, “woah honey, don’t wanna crack your head open!” and grabbed the clock off the wall. Nat doesn’t know why, even now, at the ripe age of eleven, why she loved watching that thing tell the wrong time. Here, it was always ten thirty-six. If the sun was out it was morning, if not, evening. Sometimes other clocks told her other times. At school it could be nine, or even two, or when Mom let her play with her phone, it could be any time of the day. Except Mom wasn’t around too much now, neither was Dad really.

Nat hopped off the nasty bus and up the slope of her driveway. She kicked at loose stones and awed at the carnations in the cracked concrete. She hummed a song and danced up the long slope. The driveway was harsh, worse in the winter, but lucky for Nat it was fall. Things were turning brown. Lots of trees were giving their last color of the season. She’d seen it before. The grassy hillside that wrapped around her house was patchy and brown, but that was nothing new. Still dancing and singing, Nat hopped up each step of the porch, she looked at the rotting chairs and patio table. Dad used to put those away when the weather got cold, but the rust stains in the concrete are enough to see that they’d been outside for years now. They hadn’t had dinner outside in ages. She opened the door to an empty house as usual.

Mom was a nurse, she never got home until Nat was already going to bed, unless she got lucky. Luck seems to wear out at the age of eleven though. Sometimes Nat found some of Mom’s job in the bathroom, and that confused her. She made her way to the kitchen, the rectangle pizza on yellowed trays at school didn’t always fill her up. The pantry was empty aside

from a few cans of corn, beans, and other things Nat couldn't cook. She closed the pantry, the white, chipping paint losing some flakes at the force. The fridge glowed an empty white when she opened it. Starvation seemed inevitable, but Nat knew a secret, she knew where the best snacks were. Dad wouldn't be home for at least another hour, so she wouldn't get caught snooping. She grabbed the most stable chair at the kitchen table, then pushed it up against the fridge. Carefully, Nat stepped up onto the chair, using the fridge to keep her balance. Once she stood firmly, she gave herself a proud nod, then stretched all the way on the tips of her toes and reached for the cupboard above the fridge. The tips of her fingers brushed it open. Inside, Nat could see a giant box of cheese squares. She reached again, her fingers touched the box, but couldn't grasp it. "Agh!" She yelled to herself. With all the poise a eleven-year old could muster, Nat jumped for the box. Below her, the chair creaked. Missing the first time, Nat jumped again. With each jump she swiped the box closer to her hands. "Three! Four! Five!" Nat counted the jumps. Finally, she got a firm grip on the box and yanked it down with her. "Woo!" She plopped down in the chair and gorged on cheese squares.

Nat left the kitchen with the box and made her way to the fluffy couch in the living room. Along the wall the old clock hung. "It's ten thirty-six." She looked at the frozen clock for a long time. Stagnant, like that pond behind her house used to be until that flood last year, then the water flowed like time. Unmoving, as she was, Nat felt like she hadn't changed since the clock had last ticked.

She shifted, breaking her trance, sitting down on the couch and plopping her backpack next to her, along with the cheese squares. Nat pulled out her school notebook and a pencil and began drawing. "Woosh," she said with a swooping line. Nat scribbled the clock, making sure to write each number legibly. Then, above the clock she wrote "no battery." After a handful of

cheese squares, Nat drew the yellow carnations in the driveway and used the cheese from her fingers to give them color. Next she drew Dad, giving him a scraggly grey beard and mustache, with grey hair and a grey outline to compliment. The colored pencils she used to use had worn down to almost nothing a long time ago. He was skinny, so she drew his body as two sticks close together. Mom came next. Nat gave her frizzled hair, and did her best to draw her scrubs. She drew a few lines under her eyes, a couple pockets in the scrubs that looked like a dress, and, in her hands, Nat drew the thinnest lines she could. To finish the drawing, Nat ate another handful of squares, then smeared an orange sun on the page. The end result was a mess of grey people, a grey clock with “no battery” next to it, and orange flowers with a beating orange sun. Proud of her work, Nat walked back to the kitchen and stuck it on the fridge with a magnet that used to hold her old drawings, before they were any good.

Dad’s truck chugged up the sloped driveway. The rusty red chevy sounded like it was on its last leg. Nat listened to the engine hum in park. Dad liked to sit and smoke before he came in every day. “Oh!” Nat yelled, she forgot to put the cheese squares away! If Dad saw he would be upset. She ran to the living room and grabbed the box, then hopped back up the chair against the fridge. Steadying herself, Nat jumped like before, trying to set the box in a good spot. “Two! Three! Four!” the box landed in the cupboard, but Nat slipped and fell from the chair, cracking her head against the kitchen counter on the way down. She lay on the floor, collecting herself. While dazed, the front door swung open. Nat jumped up, her vision blurry. The cupboard was still open, blood dripped from the countertop. She hopped back onto the chair and made to shut the cupboard.

“Nat! What are you doing?” Dad shouted, “you know you’re not supposed to be up there! Eat what’s in the pantry.” She slid out from the chair and made to move it back to the table. Dad stopped her, holding her by her shoulders. He looked at her face. “God dammit Nat, you’re bleeding. Go clean up.” Tears threatened to pour down, but she knew that would only make him more upset. The grip of his hands tightened, then released. She ran past the kitchen and into the bathroom.

Crooked and chipped tiles covered the lower part of the walls and floor. A bathtub yellowed from neglect matched hideous yellow wallpaper from the 1960’s. Towels hung lazily strewn about, a pile sat half outside a hamper. Along the sink, three toothbrushes worn down from years of use sat in a blue plastic cup. The mirror above the sink had several cracks in it, Nat looked at the gouge in her forehead. It was bleeding a lot, she couldn’t tell how big it was, but her frustration from her Dad boiled. It didn’t matter to him how bad the cut was. She looked at herself now, her icy blue eyes the color of arctic made temporal. Her brunette hair lay restlessly unkempt off her head. She tried to remember the last time her hair was cut. A while, to be sure. Not since hair started growing in other places, but that hadn’t been that long ago. Things were starting to change. She watched the tears roll down her cheeks in the mirror. Eleven was about the time her body would start changing, at least that’s what her teachers had said. But Nat didn’t want to change, things had been so still for so long that change was scary.

She sniffed up her tears and opened the cupboard below the sink. Inside she searched for a bandage, pushing chemicals, a stack of syringes, nail polish, a weird rubber tube, and a strange dark bottle out of the way. Nat stretched her arm to the back, pressing her head against the wood of the cupboard. She searched blindly, until she felt a small box, yanking it out. Before her hand

was free of all the junk, a syringe poked deep into her hand. Nat yelped, more tears poured down her face. When her hand was free, a syringe stuck out from the meat of her thumb. She yanked it out in a single pull, the tip of the needle a crusty brown. "I'll need another bandage, I guess," Nat said between snuffles. She wiped at her face and tried to compose herself. Dad would be mad if he saw her cry. He was always so angry now. Blood trickled from her thumb, her forehead had slowed, so she grabbed a dirty towel from the hamper and wiped at her thumb, then wiped off the smudge of blood on her forehead. She held her hand above her head like Mom taught her, while she tried to open up a bandage with her other hand. When the bleeding from her thumb slowed, she finished sticking a bandage for the small cut on her forehead, then peeled one for her thumb.

The rest of the day was a blur. There were moments Nat felt weightless, like she was floating on water. Vision became hazy, and maybe that was from how hard she hit her head, or maybe from the tip of the needle, she couldn't be sure. The world would become intensely bright, painful even. Yet Nat felt so happy that any pain didn't matter. Her head didn't hurt, neither did her hand. Dad getting angry and squeezing her shoulders only crossed her mind for a second, it was so insignificant... All of it.

When Nat came to her senses, she was in her bed. Her head was fuzzy with only a vague memory of walking herself to her room and shutting the door. Dad hadn't checked up on her; he would've assumed she was upset and wanted to be alone. She looked out the window of her bedroom. The moon hung high, full and bright. Its light illuminated her room. "Ten thirty-six," she whispered, staring at the moon. Nat stood up to close her blinds, she stumbled taking her first steps, but managed to make her way to the window. Closing the blinds, she noticed her thumb throbbing from the deep poke the needle had given her. She pressed her fingers against it,

applying pressure like Mom had taught her. “Oh!” Mom must be home by now! Nat hurried away from the window and out of her room. Her balance was not with her though. The room shifted below her feet, and she had to latch onto the doorknob to hold herself up. Slowly, Nat opened the door, and with the support of a wall, she inched her way around the corner and to her parents room.

Just outside the door, Nat heard her mother’s voice:

“ Are you fuckin’ serious, Dan?” Mom sounded upset, her voice was harsh, Nat imagined her shoving a finger at her Dad.

“Well I don’t know, I haven’t checked on her. I went up there and saw one laying on the floor with some blood. Seems she made her way back to her room. I’m sure she’s fine, look, we can shoot up then we’ll go check on her.”

“Really? Our daughter could be dead in there, and you wanna go shoot up?” A long silence fell between the two.

Finally, he answered, “no. No, I guess not, look, I’m sorry, I know it’s a problem, I know we need to stop.”

“Dan, she probably thinks you hate her. Did you even notice the drawing on the fridge? She smeared cheese on it for color. She drew me holding needles! What little girl deserves that? What little girl doesn’t even have colored pencils or crayons?!”

“Fuck, Liza, I know. You think I don’t know?” Nat heard the anger in her father’s voice rise, then dissolve into defeat. “I want the best for her, okay? I want her to love us how we love her. I know we haven’t been fair to her.”

“We both haven’t been fair to her.”

“It’s just so hard to stop.”

“You know if anyone found out-”

“I know, come on, it’s fine.” Nat heard them kiss.

“God, how did we end up like this? Poor Nat deserves better.”

“We will be better, now come on.”

Nat moved as fast as she could back to her room. Seconds later she heard her door creak open.

“Natty, are you awake?” Mom asked. Nat didn’t answer.

“I told you, she’s fine,” Dad whispered. She heard Mom smack Dad lightly. The pair walked further into the room, then Nat felt a dainty hand press against her neck.

“She’s okay.” The hand moved to her cheeks, then her forehead. “If anything, she didn’t feel good for a few hours and went to sleep. She will probably wake up early.” Mom moved away from the bed. “We need to stop this. She should be our priority, I’m throwing it all away. I’m done.”

“Done? You think it’ll be that easy?” Dad said.

“No. But we need to stop.”

“I know, but come on! The withdrawal, I’m bad enough without it for a day.”

“She deserves a better life than this, Dan. Come on, we shouldn’t be talking about this here.” They both left the room, shutting the door behind them.

When she couldn’t hear the footsteps anymore, nat sat up in her bed. Moonlight illuminated her face, she looked out the window, wondering. *Stop?* She thought, *what do they need to stop?* It was no secret to her that her parents did something they shouldn’t, and Nat knew she wasn’t as clean as other girls at school. But that didn’t mean her parents didn’t love her. “Dad is mean, but I still love him,” she whispered, looking around her room The rotunda style of

it had always interested her, she had positioned her bed in the center of it, with the foot facing the window. Sometimes the moon kept her awake, and on nights like these, she rarely got sleep.

Nat checked the clock at school: 10:42. Fifth graders still got recess, even though they talked a lot about getting rid of it. Nat was extra excited today, despite her lack of sleep, she had so much she wanted to tell her friends! Mom told her once to not talk about the syringes she would bring home, but after being poked with one, she figured people would ask about the bandage anyway. The bell rang, but before she could get up and go outside, Mrs. Wilson called to her: “Natalie, can you please come here before you go outside?” Nat sighed, but walked up to her desk anyway. Mrs. Wilson was old, her hair had a dark brown tone with strands of grey, and her fingers looked like talons. She probably wasn’t that old, but Nat liked to think she was. “Are you okay, Natalie?” Nat hated when people used her full name.

“Yes Mrs. Wilson, why wouldn’t I be?”

“I was just wondering about the bandage on your head, what happened?” Concern flooded her voice.

“Oh, I just fell trying to get some snacks out of a cupboard, I’m okay.”

Mrs. Wilson raised an eyebrow, “Oh poor girl, why couldn’t your Mom or Dad get them for you?”

“Dad wasn’t home yet.”

“You were home alone?”

“Yea everyday, only for an hour though, I’m grown up enough for it,” her tone dared Mrs. Wilson to question her authority.

Mrs. Wilson pursed her lips, “what do you do during that time?”

“Homework, draw. Mom used to say I was really good, so I try to practice,” Nat tapped her foot impatiently.

“Used to, oh-” Mrs. Wilson trailed off, muttering to herself. She looked at Nat again, Nat watched her eyes dig into the bandage, wondering what was behind it. She wouldn’t be able to see the bandage on her thumb, since Mrs. Wilson sat behind her desk, and Nat was so short for her age. Mrs. Wilson opened a drawer and pulled out a fresh bandage. “Go put this on for me, then you can go out, okay?”

“Okay.”

Nat ran to the coat closet, she stood there for a few seconds, enough time to appease Mrs. Wilson. The bandage could be changed when she got back. Running outside, her balance seemed to be normal again, but Mrs. Wilson was being weird. It was only a scratch from the counter. She shrugged and searched the playground for her friends.

“Nat!” A girl with black braids yelled.

“Acanit!” Nat, ran to the girl, Acanit stood a few inches taller than Nat, and Nat was a lot skinnier than Acanit, though the girl was not fat by any definition.

“Guess what?” Acanit said.

“What!” Nat rubbed her hands together.

“I heard that Darlene and Jackson were dating,” she crossed her arms with a smug look.

“No. that’s dumb, Jackson is so stupid, last I heard he tried to kiss Mariot during lunch and spilled milk all over her.”

“Pfft,” Acanit laughed.

“But guess what?”

“What?”

“Yesterday, I fell from a chair, look!” Nat pulled off the grimy bandage on her forehead, revealing a gash nearly the length of the bandage itself.

“Woah, you should probably clean that up, it looks a little messy,” Acanit said.

Nat rolled her eyes, “my Mom is a nurse, I know how to clean it.”

“If you say so, Nat.” Acanit gave her a concerned look. “It does look pretty dirty though, maybe even infected.”

“It’s fine, I promise!” She gave her a reassuring smile. It wasn’t the first time Nat showed off an injury to her, and each time seemed to be a little worse than the last. But Nat had made her promise she wouldn’t tell anyone about anything she showed her.

Nat questioned whether she should show her the poke on her thumb, since she wouldn’t have a bandage to cover it, but decided a second opinion might be good. “I have something better though,” she said.

“What?”

“Look at this!” Nat pulled the bandage off her thumb, then presented her palm to Acanit. She grabbed it gently with her fingers and felt it pulsating. The actual puncture didn’t look bad, though it was somewhat discolored.

“Did you go to the doctor?”

“No, sometimes Mom brings home syringes, and when I grabbed a bandage, one of them poked me,” suddenly, Nat was much less proud of the injury. Maybe it was how Acanit was reacting, or that for some reason, saying out loud that her Mom brought home needles just didn’t sound right.

“I think you should tell someone about that.”

“I did, I just told you. But you can’t tell anyone, remember?”

“I remember, but Nat, I don’t think that’s normal. You should go to the nurse, or at least show Mrs. Wilson”

“I did,” she lied.

“Well, what did she say? Does it hurt?”

“It’s fine!” Nat grew frustrated. Normally Acanit didn’t care so much.

“I don’t think it’s okay, but okay.”

Nat wasn’t so convinced herself, she spoke with a deflated confidence, “It’s fine, I promise,” she remembered what her Mom had said last night: *if anyone found out...* What could that have meant? Maybe she shouldn’t have told Acanit.

The bell to end recess rang and Nat was glad for it. She didn’t want to talk to Acanit anymore. Thoughts flooded her mind, times Dad yelled at her for small things like forgetting to push a chair in, or times she slipped on the concrete and he didn’t bat an eye. Things had been like that for so long though, it was ordinary to her. She did miss the days when Mom didn’t work so late though. Some nights Nat used to come home and Mom would braid her hair, sometimes paint her nails.

All the children ran back inside, lining up on the blacktop. Nat walked slowly up to her line. She moved her bare thumb around, and a sharp pain persisted. She stretched her hand and nearly shrieked at the pain. The gash on her forehead would garner too much attention if it was left uncovered. Nat began to sweat. The students all went inside. She went to the bathroom in the coat room and looked in the mirror. The gash looked worse than Acanit had said. It didn’t look that infected, but it was massive and pretty deep. The sight of it made her light-headed, but she knew that if Mrs. Wilson saw it, she would have to go to the nurse. *Maybe that isn’t a bad thing*, Nat thought. She turned on the sink and washed away the dried blood, then dried her forehead

with her shirt. Once she was dry, she stuck the bandage Mrs. Wilson gave her over her forehead, then went into the classroom. With a fresh bandage, Mrs. Wilson shot her concerned looks every so often, but did not raise anymore concern. Nat favored her left hand, but nobody seemed to notice that.

The bus stopped at her house and she walked up the driveway, looking at the yellow carnations. Something was off about them. She stared at the flowers in the concrete. They weren't carnations. Just dandelions-- weeds. She passed a few cigarette butts and the rusty patio. Instead of looking for food, Nat went straight to the living room, then tossed her bag down and started doing homework. She looked at the clock: ten thirty-six. Yet Nat knew it wasn't ten minutes before she heard an unfamiliar rumble of a car up the driveway, then a knock at the door. She looked out the living room window, it was angled enough where she could see the driveway, but anyone trying to look at her wouldn't be able to see her. The man wore a light blue shirt and tie, tucked into a pair of slacks. His car was white with red and blue stripes. It looked like a police car, but without any sirens. He knocked again.

Nat froze. She wasn't sure if she should answer. Her parents told her to never answer the door if they weren't home; to just pretend like she wasn't there. Dad had been so mean recently though, and she never saw Mom. Maybe this man was here to help her. Nat stood up, weighing what she should do. The man knocked again. Dad would be home in maybe forty minutes. She sat back down. Maybe it would be better if she talked to Dad first.

The man knocked two more times before he drove away. Nat worked away at multiplication until Dad got home. Once she heard the chevy chug up the driveway, her idea to tell him about the man contorted into fear-- would he be mad? If she didn't tell him, he couldn't

get angry, but maybe it was important. She heard the door open. The house flooded with the scent of smoke. He walked to the living room and looked at Nat. Nat looked at him, into him. His eyes were green, Nat had gotten her mother's eyes. His hair was fading now, but used to be a dirty blond. She had the sharp chin of her mother, but the cheeks of her father. Minutes passed, she thought about the clock, about how when it first stopped moving, she imagined it freezing her life in place. Maybe it had finally done that. Maybe--

“Let's fix that old clock, yea?” he said.

Nat didn't move.

“Come on, I know you love that clock,” he pulled it off the wall and turned it over. “We just didn't have the right screwdriver last time, we can fix it. Just a dead battery, I bet.” He set the clock face down on the living room table and disappeared for a few moments, then returned with a tiny screwdriver. Sitting at the end of the couch, he motioned to her. “Come here.”

Nat inched closer to him. She could barely remember the last time she made any affectionate contact with this man.

“Here, I'll take out the first screw, then you can do the other two.” He leaned over the clock, turning at the screw until it popped out, then set it on the table. He moved to hand her the screwdriver, she flinched.

“It's okay,” he said, a strange look of remorse in his eyes. Nat took the screwdriver, then undid the remaining screws. It took her twice the time for each screw, but he didn't say a word.

“Okay, looks like we need four triple-A batteries. I think I have a few.” He left again, this time taking much longer.

Nat sat alone, stifling tears. It wouldn't be ten thirty-six anymore. It would be just like the clocks at school, at home, on Mom's phone. It would move; change. A thought hid away at the

back of her mind, she couldn't quite pin it down, but Nat knew that her life would not be that pond before the flood anymore. It wouldn't be the clock without batteries or rust on the concrete. The permanence of her childhood was fading.

He returned with the batteries, plucked out the four dead ones, and placed the new ones in. The clock didn't tick to life.

"Damned batteries," he muttered. The man pulled them out again, Nat watched as he carefully placed each one in alternating directions in their slots. A small hope budded in her chest. The clock didn't tick. He removed them all again. Nat secretly prayed that the clock wouldn't come to life. He replaced the batteries.

Tick-Tick-Tick...

"Ah! There we go!" He smiled, then screwed the cover back onto the clock. He placed it on the wall where it had been. "Hmm," the man pulled out his phone, checking the time and adjusting the clock. She suppressed tears in her eyes and felt her hope wilt.

"Three forty-two and twenty one seconds, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four..." He gave Nat a big grin, then walked out of the living room. She watched the clock continue to tick, letting her tears fall.

At school the next day Mrs. Wilson pulled her aside again, and asked her about a needle. Acanit must've said something, and after their promise!

"It's nothing Mrs. Wilson," she said.

"Natalie, I don't think it's nothing, I think you should go talk to the nurse."

Her thumb did hurt; it still throbbed like it did yesterday, and the color had gotten more green. "I think it's fine."

“Natalie, please. I’ll even walk with you, okay?”

Nat sighed, rolled her eyes, and gave as much attitude as she possibly could.

“Fine.” They walked down the bright halls to the nurse’s room, but instead of going left into her office, Mrs. Wilson took a right, into the principal’s office. “Where are you going?” Nat said.

“I just need to grab something, come with Natalie, it’s okay,” she smiled. Through the window, Nat saw two police men and a dog in a vest. When they entered the room, it’s ears perked up, and stared at her.

“Hi sweetie,” one of the officers said, “Do you want to pet the dog?” He gave her a weird smile, and Nat hated the way adults talked to her when they didn’t know her name. But she wasn’t about to say no to petting a dog. She reached out with her good hand. It ignored her for the most part, focusing on the hand the needle had poked. It sniffed at it, then barked.

“Shush!” the officer who spoke to her said. He left the office, dragging the dog with him, leaving her with Mrs. Wilson, the other officer, and now the principal.

“Hi Nat,” the principal said. She walked in with high heels that clunked with every step. She wore a suit-like top and a long skirt.

“Hi,” she replied.

“This is officer Santo, he’s going to be bringing you somewhere you’ll be safe, okay?”

The confusion of the past few days welled up inside her. It was all wrong, she knew. Acanit was right to tell Mrs. Wilson. Her parents were bad, there shouldn’t be needles in the house, but they were doing better. Life was going to move forward now.

“No, you don’t understand, it’s not a big deal,” Nat said.

“Natalie, your parents haven’t been treating you right, they aren’t--”

Nat cut off the principle, “What do you know?! All because of a stupid needle! My Mom is a nurse, it doesn’t matter!”

“It does matter.”

The officer spoke up, “Natalie, your parents aren’t going to be home tonight. We can talk about this later, but you need to come with officer Martins and I.”

Nat opened her mouth, but no words came out. This was it. Dad shouldn’t have ever fixed the clock, then things would’ve stayed the same.

Her reflection in the window of the police cruiser was not one she recognized. Her face was thin, her hair frail. When they pulled up to her driveway so she could grab clothes, officer Santo spoke, “Sure are a lotta weeds here, just look at all these dandelions!” Before she left, she looked at the clock, and thought of the new life it found in electricity.