

THE BOY WHO LOST AN HOUR, THE GIRL WHO LOST HER LIFE

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Tony woke with such a start. Light from the full moon flooded through the window of his bedroom at the side of the bungalow. Moonlight clearly lit the Donald Duck clock on the wall. The clock hung higher than Tony could reach, unless he stood on a chair. Little hand between three and four. Big hand at the bottom. Half-past three.

Panic seized him. He jerked up his left wrist. On his new Aladdin watch the big hand was at the bottom but the little hand pointed between two and three. It was half-past two by his wristwatch. Despite Daddy's promise, despite Tony's own vows, he'd woken up too late. Daddy must have tiptoed around the house at two ay-em. He had come in here, but he hadn't wakened Tony.

Aunt Jean, who always wore jeans, had given Tony the watch the day before for his fifth birthday. He was Big Five. Soon he'd be starting real school. Pride was one reason why he kept the watch on when he went to bed. But mainly, if he took it off, he might forget exactly where it was when the time came to change all the clocks.

At the birthday party he had gone round showing the wristwatch to Tim and Michael and Sarah and the others just a bit too much, until Sarah and Tim had thrust their own presents at him a second time, as if he hadn't liked those enough: the toy police car, the bendy dinosaur...

Home wasn't big enough to hold a party in. In the wooden community hall along the road there'd been balloons and cakes and musical chairs and pass-the-parcel and a magic-man. When he went to bed Tony had been so tired. He'd asked for his curtains to stay open. Mummy said the moon would keep him awake later on. Maybe she thought he was scared of the dark. Oh no. He hadn't wanted Daddy to need to switch on the light at two, and dazzle him. Because the curtains were open, before he fell asleep Tony had seen the real police car cruise slowly past. It had stopped by the high wall of the huge house along the road where children lived who were odd because they didn't have Mummies and Daddies.

From the bottom of the bed, Big Bear and Little Bear stared at Tony now with glittery eyes. The birds hadn't started their chorus yet. It was so quiet. Tony squirmed along the duvet toward the bears. Pressing himself right up against the window, he stared at his Aladdin watch again.

It was half-past two for Tony. It was half-past three for Daddy and Mummy and the rest of the world.

The top bit of window was open for air because the weather was warm earlier this year than usual. He heard a voice calling softly, "Hey there!"

When Mummies and Daddies came to collect their children from the party, they stood around for a while drinking glasses of wine.

"This is the night, isn't it? It is forward, not back--?"

"Do we lose an hour or do we gain--?"

"Look: when it's two o'clock it becomes three o'clock. We're an hour ahead of where we were. So it stays dark longer in the morning--"

"Seven o'clock is really six o'clock--"

Wine could make grown-ups silly. They seemed to be getting heated up about nonsense, but this was important to Tony in view of his new Aladdin watch. During the magic show Aunt Jean had been sipping wine at the back of the hall with Mummy and Daddy. Now she was sitting on her own. So Tony

asked her about this business of "changing the clocks."

She'd laughed. "I'm not sure a child can follow this!! Grown ups get flummoxed enough. Foreigners must think we're crazy, unless the same thing happens in their own countries. Well, in our country twice a year the time changes. Spring forward, Fall back: that's how you remember. Fall's another name for Autumn, you see."

No, he didn't see.

"Because in the Autumn all the leaves fall off the trees. That's when time goes back an hour. The original idea was to make the world lighter on winter mornings. But now it's Spring, so tonight the time goes forward again to what it ought to be anyway. So all the clocks have to change."

Who could possibly change all the clocks in the world? Did they change themselves?

Aunt Jean took another swallow of red wine. "People change their own clocks, Tony."

He brandished the watch she had given him.

"You have to change it yourself." She giggled. "Two o'clock in the morning: that's when the time changes."

When everybody was asleep in bed? People must get up specially. But his Aladdin watch didn't have a 'larm—like those watches which would go beep-beep.

"It doesn't have a 'larm!" he protested.

Aunt Jean seemed annoyed. "Well, I'm sure I'm very sorry about that!"

Back home, the man on the TV said how everyone should put their clocks forward at two in the morning; so this must be really important.

You had to put your own forward. Had to do it yourself. Tony was Big Five now. He asked Daddy to promise to wake him up at two, cos there was no 'larm on his watch. "You oughtn't to have said that to Aunt Jean," Mummy told him quite sternly. "As though you weren't satisfied! You hurt her feelings."

Daddy made a never-mind face at Mummy. "It's his birthday, after all—"

"Huh, at this rate he won't have another—"

"Let's forget it, hmm? Tiring day. I'll wake him up at two." And Daddy had winked at Mummy.

"What happens," asked Tony, "if you don't put the clock forward?"

"In that case," Mummy said sharply, "you get left behind."

He'd been left behind. Cos they thought he'd been rude to Aunt Jean; but he hadn't been!

A little girl was standing in the garden by the big rose bush, out of sight of the street. She was waving to him. She must have been left behind too!

The big window was kept locked for safety when the house was empty and at night, but Mummy had showed him how to unlock it in case there was ever a fire. As he pushed the window open the girl came closer. She was skinny, with untidy short brown hair. Her dress was printed with gray flowers which might have been any color during the day. That dress looked a bit torn and dirtied. Her thin ankles poked into trainers fastened tightly by those cling-together straps.

"The clocks have changed," Tony told her, and showed his Aladdin watch. "I've been left behind!"

For a moment he thought she was going to laugh at him, but then she replied firmly, "You aren't the only one."

"Daddy promised to wake me but he left me sleeping when he changed the clock."

"You won't be able to wake your Daddy now," she said with absolute certainty. "You can't wake a Daddy or a Mummy or anyone. They're all in a different hour. They're in their own world." She seemed to know all about this. Of course she must, if she was here and able to talk to him. What had she done

that was wrong?

"They wouldn't be able to see you!" she hissed.

Tim had told Tony about a movie. Tim's baby-sitter and her boyfriend had wanted to watch the movie, and Tim was supposed to be in bed upstairs. Tim's home was bigger than Tony's; it had two floors. Tim had crept downstairs. The door to the sitting room was ajar. He had watched through the gap.

Once upon a time in a big old house a little girl had died horribly. A man and woman moved in, who didn't know about the girl. They already had two young sons but they wanted a girl as well. Soon somebody whom no one could see was using the toilet. Somebody was taking snacks and milk from the fridge. Somebody was knocking things over and breaking them. At first the parents thought their own boys were to blame—but then an awful accident happened to one of the boys, which couldn't possibly have been his fault. The grown-ups called for a priest to come and throw water around the rooms and pray and exercise the house ...

That's how it would be here at home. Tony would use the toilet and he'd get hungry and thirsty, but Mummy and Daddy would never see him because he was an hour behind.

"What can I do?" he asked the girl.

"Do what I say," she said. "I know what to do. We have to go somewhere special." She pointed up at the full moon. "That's a face up there."

"It's the Man in the Moon."

She stamped her foot angrily. "No, it isn't. It's a face all right, but it's the face of a clock. Only, you can't see the hands till you go to a special place. You have to see the hands move on the Moon. Then you can come back home, and it'll be all right."

Tony gazed at the bright blotchy Moon. It was as round as a clock tonight, a luminous clock.

"What if I just wind my watch forward now?"

"Too late," she sang out, "too late! You'll only break it!"

How did she know about the Moon?

"People have been to the Moon," she said.

"I know that!"

"That was to see about fitting new hands on it. The old hands are invisible 'cept to people who get left behind—and from special places. The spacemen stuck a spike in the Moon for the new hands. Soon it'll be a clock everyone can see, 'cept if it's cloudy."

"You can't see all of it all the time—"

"They'll light it properly. You're wasting time! I won't show you the place if you don't come now."

Tony pulled on his clothes and shoes and he climbed onto the hard windowframe, which hurt his knees, and dropped himself down on to the path.

The girl was taller than Tony by a head or more. Maybe she was seven. Or eight.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"People call me Mar-gar-et." She spoke each sound as if they were strange to her. "But I'm not a Mar-gar-et. I'm Midge."

A small garden hugged the bungalow. At the back of the garden was a fence. One of the planks had rotted and shifted aside. The girl already seemed to know about that. A grown-up couldn't get through the fence, but Tony could, even if it meant scraping clothes; and Midge was so skinny.

Behind the fence was a waste place--and beyond was a forest of Christmas trees in rows, with lanes which went on and on.

As Midge went with Tony into the forest, she asked, "What's your name, anyway?"

"It's Tony—I thought you knew about me!"

She caught hold of his hand, the one with the watch. Her own hand was sticky and strong.

"I know all about you! You had a birthday party. Balloons and Mummies and Daddies."

She must have peeped through the window of the community hall. She must have seen him walk back home with his parents, carrying his presents. He tried to pull away, but she tugged him along with her into the forest. "You have to come with me and see the hands of the Moon!"

Because of the Moon it was bright enough to see all the silvery branches.

"I want to go home," he begged.

"You can't go back yet. You'd still be too early. An hour too early."

"I'd have asked you to the party if I'd known you, Midge!"

She laughed.

And he began to cry.

With her free hand she slapped him on the cheek.

"Cry-baby," she mocked. "It's horrid being lost, Tony. Never being seen. Never being heard. 'Cept by my friends who can see the hands of the Moon."

Did she really want him as her friend?

"Where's the place?" he sniveled.

"It's at the far end of the forest."

He'd be safe until then, wouldn't he? She wouldn't slap him again? He let her lead him along, though really he couldn't have stopped her from dragging him.

After a while she said, "You'll have your time back—but I shan't. Not till the Moon grins wide and spits me out like it grinned and swallowed me once, and my friends."

"You said the Moon wasn't a man with a face, you said it was a clock!"

"Mainly it's a clock. Mainly!"

Tony was terrified. Who were these friends who were waiting at the far end of the forest?

The pair of them came to a clearing. All around it, the boughs of the Christmas trees jutted like hundreds of barbed spears. The Moon glared down. Tony should easily have been able to see other children waiting, but he couldn't. Midge's friends must be hiding behind tree trunks. She sat down on soft nice-smelling needles, pulling him with her. Then she shuffled round behind him.

"Look up, look up," she chanted. "Gape at the Moon. Keep your eyes open. Don't close them. Don't look anywhere else or I'll have to hit you."

Tony stared up. His ears were alert for any rustle of feet creeping closer, but the pine needles would deaden the noise. The Moon began to blind him to anything else. Soon there was just that bright blotchy flat disc.

"It's horrid being lost, Tony—"

Desperately he tried to see hands on the Moon. Gaze as he might, he couldn't.

Gradually, out of the corners of his eyes, he became sure that other children were indeed sitting around in the clearing, clasping their drawn-up knees and staring at him. He didn't dare look to make sure.

"The Moon's made of stone," came Midge's voice, "and so am I. Hard stone." Did she have a stone in her hand? Was she was going to hit him with it the moment he stopped gaping? "A stone clock. A moon-dial..."

His eyes were watering with effort. Of course he blinked now and then.

"Please, Midge," he begged, but no reply came.

Gray light began to dawn. A hundred birds started singing. The Moon was fainter now, a sickly yellow. When it sank slowly behind the top branches of a Christmas tree at last he saw the dark pointers upon the Moon's face—and he cried out, "Yes, yes, I can see them!"

Midge wasn't there anymore. She'd gone. He hadn't heard her leave because of the birds. Nor were there any other children in the clearing. He was alone.

His legs had cramped. He staggered but soon he was running.

Only when he had climbed back into his bedroom, and the Donald Duck clock caught his eye, did he think to look at his wristwatch. Little hand near five. Big hand at nine. It was quarter to five--by the clock and by the Aladdin watch as well.

Mummy came in to wake him, but he was already awake. He'd been fretting whether she would come, or whether he'd have to go to the kitchen on his own—and would they be surprised to see him? Had they been trying to lose him? "I'm sorry!" he told her.

Mummy looked suspicious. "What about?"

"Cos I was rude to Aunt Jean."

"Oh ... I thought you'd broken something."

He pointed at the clock. "Daddy didn't wake me at two."

"You were dead to the world, but your Daddy thought you'd want to see the right time in the morning—"

Oh yes. To see the right time was everything.

She realized what he had said. "At two? Did you think we'd sit up till two?"

With the summer term Tony started real school. The school bus took him there and brought him back. Different Mummies would ride on the bus in case bigger children behaved badly. Always two Mummies, so that they could talk to each other.

One hot day, men were busy tearing up the road near the huge house with the wall all around. A red light halted the bus, and Tony saw Midge on the pavement. She was standing stiffly beside a big woman who wore a blue suit. Those flowers on Midge's dress were pink roses. Tony rapped his knuckles on the glass, then he slapped his flat palm, which made more noise.

The woman in blue had noticed Tony and was frowning. Midge only stared emptily in the same direction as ever. He slapped harder.

"Stop that," he heard a Mummy call out. "Stop it right now! Don't make fun."

The other Mummy said to her friend, "That's the girl that runs away. Though she's supposed to be severely," and she said a big word.

Back home, Tony asked his Mummy, "What's or-tis-tic mean?"

"Artistic," she corrected him. "It means you're good at painting and playing music and things like that. Did a teacher say that about you today?"

Tony shook his head. He mustn't have heard right in the bus. Anyway, Midge hadn't said anything to him about paint or music. He remembered how blank her look had been, as if her face was a stone.