

CONVERSATIONS FROM AROUND A KITCHEN TABLE AS HEARD BY A BROKEN CLOCK

Kelly Molloy, Scottsdale Community College
Honorable Mention, Short Story

THE BREATH OF night filled the twilight yard. Only the raucous chirping of unseen crickets sabotaged the chilly silence that hung in the air like smoke from the neighbor's chimney. The chorus of nightly noise was cut off in mid-crescendo by the snarl of tires on gravel, the slam of a car door. Feet tromped across the brittle grass and fallen leaves. As keys jangled in the door, the crickets' song trickled back to full volume.

She shut the door on the concert outside, and clopped her way to the table. The floorboards groaned their welcome to each footstep until she sank heavily into one of the rickety but loyal chairs. She looked at the stoop of his shoulders as he buried his head in his hands. From its overhanging shelf, the clock echoed her heartbeat, trying to fill the heavy silence.

"I went back," he said quietly.

"Hm."

The clock filled time.

"Pretty much what we expected," he said with a sniff. He looked at her and shrugged. "No surprises, really."

"Yeah. I kind of figured. I was hoping..." Her fingers traced the knothole in the worn table. Nothing but the glide of flesh on wood and the clock's anxious monologue. She stared at the rings in the wood. Their eyes weren't on speaking terms yet.

"You gonna try again?"

"Not much point," he breathed, "Is there?"

She smoothed the mesh marks on the table's face, the battle scars of children's art projects, white on the golden flesh. "I guess not." She licked her lips. "You could always try that other place, though. Might be different this time. "

His chair creaked. He ran his hand over the stubble of his hair. "Nah, I didn't like it. The smell hurt my eyes, made me feel all sick. It was too depressing. You know I hate being depressed."

"Yeah."

The clock ticked eagerly, trying to interest them with the monotonous details of its day. The woman's fingers explored the chip missing from the edge of the table. "It's better than nothing, though, right?"

"I used to think so. I'm not so sure anymore. Maybe I'm better off with nothing."

"You've decided, then?"

"I think so."

"Oh."

"We've talked about it for a long time."

“I know.”

“Better this way.”

“Maybe it is.”

“I know this can’t be easy...”

“Harder for you, probably.”

“I don’t know about that.”

She scraped her nails across the finished surface and began gouging the edge of the table with them. His calloused hand flowed across the table and washed up on hers, silencing her carving.

“Will you be okay?” he whispered.

“Fine,” she said, still staring at the table.

“Will you forgive me?”

Her eyes slowly broke orbit and looked up at his. A weak smile twitched the corners of her mouth.

“I love you,” she said.

“Love you, too.”

Their hands squeezed each other. She brushed a sigh away impatiently.

“Do you need me to...help? Can I get you something?” she said.

“No, I’m fine. It’ll be like we talked about.”

She nodded, rubbing his hand.

“I think I’d rather do it on my own,” he said gently.

“When?”

“Tonight. I guess. Better than waiting for it.”

“You hate waiting.”

“Yeah.”

“Me, too.”

“Yeah.”

She traced the crinkled pathways of his knuckles. More scars. He cleared his throat. His fingers twitched as he took her other hand.

“Maybe it’s better if you go.”

She sealed her lips into a line. She nodded stiffly. “Okay.”

“I just think it would be easier...”

“No, you’re right. Easier.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re...” She stroked his hand to smooth over the catch in her voice. “How long do I have to go?”

“Not long. I’m all ready. Just give me an hour or so. You could go to your sister’s.”

“Nah, she’s probably asleep. I’ll see her tomorrow.”

“You sure?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“That’s my girl.”

She nodded. “Always.”

“I won’t do it if you don’t want me to,” he murmured.

“I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“Yes, you could.”

“Do you want me to ask?”

“No.”

“Well, okay, then.”

The clock prattled on.

“Nice of you to offer, though,” the woman said.

He snorted. “It’s the least I can do.”

“But, really, it’ll all end up the same, anyway, won’t it?”

“Pretty much.”

“So, really, this isn’t so bad.”

“Not really.”

“I mean, the really bad part’s already happened, right?”

“Mostly, yeah.”

“Okay, then.”

She crushed her fingers against his. “Maybe I should go now. I hate long goodbyes.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

They kissed blindly, fumbling for one another as if they were suddenly out of practice. She crinkled her nose under the sting of imminent tears. “Will you...leave a note or something?”

“Sure. In the bedroom.”

“Is that where you’ll be?”

“Yeah...Listen, would you please call Keith, get him to come over first? I don’t want you to...”

“I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“Call Keith.”

“Don’t worry.”

The clock erupted into its disjointed, jangled chorus. The man glanced at his watch, then stood to examine the clock on the shelf. She hovered beside him.

“That clock’s never right,” he said.

“I’ll get it fixed.”

“Good. It’s a pretty good clock, otherwise.”

“Yeah.” She rapped it on the side. The startled clock flipped itself over its ornamental head and crashed face-first to the floor, hiccupping into silence mid-chime. She scooped it up. He twitched the corner of his mouth.

“You might still be able to fix that.”

“Maybe.”

“You could always get a new one.”

“I like this one.”

“Whatever you want.”

She gingerly placed the clock back on its shelf and nuzzled into his shoulder.

“I should go,” she said softly.

“Yeah,” he whispered into her hair. “Gimme an hour, maybe a little more.”

“Okay.”

“And call Keith.”

She nodded, rumpling his shirt with her cheek. “Don’t worry about me.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Keys scraped the table, and she trudged to the door. The crickets outside filled the open doorway with their music. The couple stared at each other, silent.

“Take care of yourself, okay?” he muttered. She nodded numbly and stepped outside to the crickets. The door clumped shut behind her. He waited. The car door slammed and the emphysemic choke of the engine rattled the house. He went into the bedroom, the floorboards announcing his procession in cranky whispers. He pulled out a letter, slightly crumpled from the hours it had hidden in his pocket, and positioned it carefully on the dresser. He closed the door behind him.

Outside, she sat in the idling car, staring at the house while unnoticed tears slithered down her cheeks. Her fingers kneaded the steering wheel, turning her knuckles white. A few moments of eternity passed by, ignoring her completely. She stared at the house. The bedroom light went out. Her jagged breath fogged up the windshield. The crickets abruptly stopped their singing. Nothing but the trembling of the engine and the breathing of the night. She rested her forehead on the steering wheel as sobs racked her body. The crickets resumed their singing, drowning out her screams with their cheerful music.

