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## Master Craftsman

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Every night, the clockmaker keeps three lamps burning on specially made hooks placed in his workshop. They provide all the illumination he needs, and are placed at different angles so as not to create messy shadows. The clockmaker hates a mess. Atypical of his profession, his workshop is clean and uncluttered, with pristine white furnishings. No spring is out of place, no metal turning escapes his raptor eyes or his full-bristled broom. He personally cleans each morning with lye soap and elbow grease and an immense zeal. A visitor might mistake the room for a hospital.

The clockmaker grunts and places his minuscule screwdriver on the workbench. Rising from his stool, he takes the miniature clock he has been working in his hands as he paces toward the window. The only window in his workshop, and it faces away from the city. If it had faced the other way, the clockmaker would have seen the enormous clock that he had designed and built for city hall. It was lit from behind atop the tallest structure in the city. People called it his masterpiece. The clockmaker disagreed. The town clock was big and pretty, that was all. Standing at the window, he raises the pocket watch-sized hunk of gears and springs in front of his face as if he were looking through it, until it eclipses the moon. He smiles, but he is not happy. The clockmaker smiles only when he is mad with frustration. His real masterpiece is incomplete and time is running out.

The clockmaker laughs. "Time is running out." People often use clock-related clichés around him. He only thinks of them when he is smiling in frustration. Lowering the metal in his hands, he takes a final glance at the dark mountains then wheels around to face his workbench. Five springs, arranged by size, sit next to his tools, taunting him. He needs to pack them into an area the half the size of a sugar cube, but it is late. They will wait until morning. Extinguishing the three lamps, the clockmaker closes up his shop for the night.

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When the clockmaker returns home, his wife is waiting for him, reading by candlelight in bed. A plump, redheaded woman who was educated at a women's seminary, she has never worked outside the house. She is the clockmaker's one luxury; he spends his money buying her fashionable clothes, the latest books from London and Paris, fine jewelry that his guild brothers have made, and other lavish goods. As he prepares for bed, she straightens herself against her pillow, sets the book on her nightstand, and with buckled brow: "What has got you so bothered in your watchshop?"

The clockmaker stops unbuckling his belt, turns to her and flashes a smile. He says nothing, but finishes removing his clothing and blows out the candles. That night, lying face-up in the dark, they will talk of his workshop, of the incredible timepiece he is perfecting, and of the five springs. By the time they fall asleep, he will have either found a solution, or they will have quarreled and gone to bed angry. If they quarrel, the clockmaker will stop at the market tomorrow, purchase an imported, expensive set of paints, and come home, beaming as he opens the door, trying to be a peacemaker.

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The clockmaker is very happy; he has completed his masterpiece and did not have to buy paints. Sitting in triumph at his workbench, he adjusts the dial to its lowest setting and winds the watch. A ticking sound fills his head – bliss! He counts the soft ticks, fifty-nine of them before the loud tick marking a full minute. In fourteen more minutes there will be a single bell tone. In fifty-nine there will be a Westminster Chimes pattern. His eyes close in pleasure as he slumps down in his chair, counting seconds and reveling in the watch's accuracy. It turned out to be far more accurate than he had imagined. How the world will thank him, when he unveils his invention in the city square next week.

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Although it is midday on a Thursday, a large crowd has gathered in the square to see the clockmaker's next great invention. The clockmaker is a local celebrity; even the mayor and his family have arrived in their carriage to witness the spectacle. But the clockmaker is running late, and the crowd has begun to grow restless. They had expected to see a large and majestic creation and are puzzled by the absence of a structure covered by cloth, ready for unveiling. The clockmaker's



wife shuffles her weight from foot to foot from her place behind the podium where her husband is due to speak. She does not know what he is presenting, what he has been working on for months. He has come to her with problems and frustrations, and she has done her best to talk him through them. But he is the master craftsman, and she is just his well-educated and spoiled wife who gets him out of jams, on occasion. She knows the object is small, small enough to be a pocket watch. She knows that it is far more intricate than anything her husband, or probably anyone, has ever attempted before. Her thoughts drift from the mysterious invention to the wooden panels of the podium, to the bustling and irritated crowd, to the gray, woolen clouds overhead, which look low enough to scrape her husband's clock on top of city hall.

From nowhere, the clockmaker arrives in his finest suit. He hustles past his wife, stopping only long enough to give her a quick peck on the cheek before he mounts the large podium. His wife's ears are pricked. The mayor's ears are pricked. The crowd's ears are pricked. The entire city, even the noisy factories, seems to have grown silent in anticipation of the clockmaker's speech. It turns out to be short. The clockmaker clears his throat and begins: "Fellow citizens! I am proud to present to our fine city a new technology, one that will revolutionize the way we live, that will make our city the undisputed leader in commerce and culture. I am about to present to you time itself, in its pure form. This gift I give to you with no expectation of payment, for I believe its worth to be too great to be expressed in monetary terms. Without further ado, I present to you the gift of perfect time!"

The crowd is silent; nothing is happening. The clockmaker steps away from the podium and puts his hands in his pockets expectantly. In about thirty seconds, the ticking begins. Incredibly clear and exact, just like in the clockmaker's workshop. The crowd hears it too, and they are applauding loudly for this magic clock that ticks out of nowhere. The clockmaker raises his hands in success. Then he steps behind the podium. No one sees him leave. Eventually, the crowd realizes that the demonstration is over and begins to filter out of the square.

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It takes a few hours for most of the town to realize that the ticking is not stopping, although some of the farmers and deliverymen who work outside of the city discover the phenomenon very quickly. No matter where they go around the town, they can hear the soft ticks of seconds, the loud ticks of minutes, the Westminster chimes. They try walking around corners, descending into their cement basements, putting pillows over their heads. Then there is panic. At twilight, for the second time on the cloudy day, a crowd gathers in the town square, this time full of anger and facing the mayor's residence. The mayor, delivering a speech amid the incessant ticks and tocks, outlines a plan to the frustrated mob.

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The first thing they do is try to find the clockmaker's device. The podium is dismantled and every board thoroughly inspected, then destroyed with sledgehammers by the frustrated townspeople. The clock continues. They search the entire square for suspicious objects, every tree and statue, with no success. By now it is approaching nightfall, and many are worried about their chances of sleeping amid the perpetual ticking. Just before the Westminster chimes toll eight o'clock, someone suggests going to find the clockmaker.

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The clockmaker's wife has not seen her husband since he dismantled the podium that afternoon. Alarmed at his apparent disappearance, she had gone back to their house, hoping to find him celebrating his invention with fine beer and tickets to the local theatre. But he was not home and did not return all evening. The continued clicking of his watch contraption has kept her on edge; she expects him to walk through the front door at any minute. But she has become very alarmed. Their house is not far from the town square, and she could hear the mob's angry shouts as they tore up the podium. By the time a group of citizens reach the house, she has retired to the bedroom. The mob, now holding torches, pounds on her door, demanding to speak with her husband. When it becomes clear that they will not leave, she opens her bedroom window and calls down to them, explaining that her husband is not at home. They do not believe her. They yell and pump their torches in the air. Her repeated, pleading insistence that she has no idea of the clockmaker's whereabouts does not satisfy

them. The ticking has not stopped. They are growing violent. The clockmaker's wife has just enough time to slip out the back door of her house before they throw their torches onto its roof and through its windows, setting it alight.

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A group of citizens have climbed the city hall clock tower, armed with torches and sledgehammers. They believe that the clockmaker has hidden the device in his older creation. This time they do not bother to inspect the clock thoroughly; the strongest among them, a behemoth machinist from the boiler and stove factory, smashes the clock's illuminated face. The glass falls from the tower with a loud crash, momentarily drowning the ticking seconds. The mayor looks across the square from his balcony, seeing the machinist and his crew in sharp-edged silhouette against the clock's powerful lantern. Then they smash this too and the mayor, for the first time in his long career, begins to truly fear for his city.

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The clockmaker's wife has sought refuge at the house of her sister, on the outskirts of town. Her sister was unable to attend the ceremony in the town square because her infant child has been suffering a cold. Standing over her son's cradle, she coos and pulls faces, trying to placate her sick child who has been crying ever since the ticking began. Looking up for a few seconds, she asks her sister what her husband has done.

"I have no idea what it is or how he did it!" she insists. "He never tells me what he's working on, and I don't know where he's run off to!" The clockmaker's wife is frightened. Unless someone finds her husband, she is the only living link to the city's most wanted fugitive. She is worried about the safety of her sister and her family, now that they are harboring her. The baby continues to cry, his breaths synchronized with the ticking seconds. Her brother-in-law storms into the room, his large, carpenter's hands held up in panic, ten o'clock and two o'clock. He points at the window. The two women gaze in horror onto the city, an orange-and-smoke blaze at its center.

"I am going to pray that the fire does not reach as far as our home. But either way, people will come looking. Whoever survives will come looking." He glares at the clockmaker's wife. She knows her time here is up. She pleads "I don't know where he is! But if I knew, I would be the first to shake him up and down and scream at him to try to stop this! I wish I knew where my crackpot husband was so I could strangle him, so that I could bring him into the town square and have people throw stones at him to make him pay for this! Don't throw me out. Please don't make me go out there." But it is too late to convince the carpenter. He opens the front door, revealing a distant-but-approaching flicker of moving torches, and gestures that she needs to leave.

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The mob has begun to light the square on fire. They chop down trees and smash storefronts and rubbish bins. Then they turn their attention to the mayor's mansion. They demand an answer that the mayor cannot give. The mayor's carriage speeds away from the city as his house burns. All through the night, the town burns, and still the sounds do not stop.

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The clockmaker walks through a cemetery on a hill outside of town. No one has seen him yet, and he has not yet entertained the possibility that they will. He spent the afternoon strolling the aisles of tombstones like a beaming child, rubbing the silver watch between his palms like a smooth stone. He had set loose his masterpiece! Perfect time, anywhere, with no clocks to look at or wind up, for everyone, for free, all throughout the city. He expected the mayor to find him and offer him a substantial prize for his revolutionary contribution to humanity. Over the course of the evening, he has realized that this will not happen. Why haven't they embraced his perfect time? When he sees the city ablaze he panics. What have they done, and why? The clockmaker smiles as he looks toward the burning town. He knows he cannot return, but he cannot bear to remove or stop his watch, bringing silence and all sorts of timekeeping errors back upon the city. But he will not get the recognition he

deserves! Why haven't his fellow citizens hailed him as the next Da Vinci? Or better than Da Vinci! The clockmaker is crushed, but even he understands that his clock is too dangerous to carry with him.

Stopping at the last tombstone in the row he is walking, the clockmaker stops in his tracks and kneels down, beginning to dig with his bare hands. But after a few handfuls, he stops. He can't bury his perfect clock in the cemetery – only dead things ought to be put there. He stands up, feeling slightly foolish now with his fine suit and dirty hands. After a second's more thought, he concludes that hiding the device in the cemetery would leave too much of a risk of someone digging it up while exhuming a grave or burying a fresh corpse. Leaving the graveyard, the clockmaker walks toward a large oak tree growing by the roadside. Halfway up, just below its leafy branches, is a large knot-hole; an ideal hiding place. He lands the clock inside the knot-hole on his third throw, then looks back at his burning city. The mayor's carriage approaches on the road out of the city. Its horses maintain a blistering pace, sending the cart ricocheting from stone to stone on the cobbled road. In a display of athleticism anomalous for his age, the clockmaker jumps onto the back of the cart as it peels past the cemetery. He holds tightly, knowing he will be jostled about for some time.

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The carpenter's son has just learned to walk. His father, now very busy rebuilding the city, was not able to see his first steps, but his wife described them in detail over their meager dinner. He relates to her the day's troubles – the city is trying to build a new clock tower that is synchronized to perfect time, but none of the city's craftsmen can build a clock that is so exact. As foreman for the construction of the tower itself, the carpenter is extremely frustrated. His son gurgles nonsense words as if consoling his father. In a few days, he will speak his first word, "hour." He no longer cries all the time. The carpenter and his wife don't even notice the clock anymore. And thanks to increased punctuality, the rebuilding of the city is progressing far ahead of schedule. Only the carpenter's wife is unhappy. She and her husband never mention her sister, but whenever he talks about the clock or the clock tower, she looks down, lost in a vague mourning, remembering alone the way things were before perfect time descended upon the town.

