
Noelle and the
Christmas Clock

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It was Christmas Eve, and the whole street smelled of chimney smoke and baked apples. Every window glowed like a lantern. Above the rooftops the snow was thinking about falling, and somewhere, very far off, a sleigh bell jingled once.

In one of those glowing windows, Noelle was waiting for Christmas, and finding it very, very hard. Grown-ups wait with tea. Noelle waited with counting.

By tonight, she had counted the sleeps (nineteen, then eleven, then, at last, one very long one), the doors of the advent calendar (twice, in case one had been hiding something), and the baubles on the tree (forty-one, or forty-two if you counted the odd one). Noelle had checked the window for snow so often that the glass had a small, hopeful smudge.

Grandma was due in the morning, which was, as far as Noelle could tell, the same as never, only longer.

Christmas Eve is the longest day of the year. The calendar says it isn't, but the calendar is wrong.

Mum was in the kitchen, pressing stars into cookie dough and humming a carol a little to the left of the tune. Dad was kneeling by the fireplace with a box of matches, getting ready for the first fire of Christmas, which Dad lit every year, slowly, after whispering something to the flame. Noelle had never once heard what.

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And Noelle, flat on the sofa, fidgeting as if there were elves in both slippers, asked for the eleventh time since breakfast:

"Is it time yet?"

"Not yet," said Dad, which was what Dad had said the other ten times. Dad sounded, as always, rather pleased about it.

Biscuit, the dog, sighed on the rug, the way only a dog can.

The odd bauble was not a bauble at all. It was a tiny glass clock, and Dad hung it every year, last of all, on the highest branch within reach. Its hands had stopped at four minutes to midnight. They had been stopped there for as long as Noelle could remember, so the clock was only right twice a day, which she found boring.

Noelle looked at it now. It ticked. Once. Then the glass shimmered, the way an old owl blinks when it has made up its mind.

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The room folded up like a letter.

A chime rang far off, as if time had cleared its throat. When Noelle looked up, there was an archway of ice, and a sign that read Timekeeper Town, North Pole.

In Timekeeper Town, the snow keeps time. Each flake landed with a tiny tick, and the air smelled of peppermint.

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Beneath the arch, a small elf in round glasses was frowning at a pocket watch with no hands. Her coat was cranberry red and far too big, with the sleeves rolled up three times.

"Oh, good, you're here," she said. "Tilli Tock, Keeper of Small Moments. We are only slightly behind, but in December, slightly behind is practically on time."

She glanced at Noelle's feet. "Ah. Elves in the slippers," she said, with a nod. "Cousins of mine. They get terribly excited in December."

She pointed. At the end of an avenue of lamp-posts wearing scarves stood a tower of glass and golden gears. Its great hands had stopped at four minutes to midnight, and they were trembling. The Clock did not tick. It was holding its breath.

Below it, in the houses of the town, the windows were going dark, one by one, like candles on a cake.

"It's being pulled both ways," said Tilli. "Some in every house are pushing it on towards morning. Some are holding it back. Tonight they are pulling exactly as hard as each other, and the poor thing can't move at all."

"Why would anybody hold Christmas back?" said Noelle.

Tilli looked at her over the round glasses. "That isn't mine to tell. Somebody says it in your house every year, very quietly."

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She turned back to the tower. "When it gives, it will strike all twelve chimes at once. Unless somebody winds it through, one chime at a time. I have been Keeper for a hundred and six Decembers, and I have never once heard it strike on time."

At the foot of the tower stood a brass key, taller than a door. Tilli put her shoulder to it. "It winds on small, lovely things, noticed and said out loud. It hears every one. Snow, landing on my nose."

Bong.

The key shifted a hair. Far below, one window lit, yellow and small.

Tilli sagged. "That's the trouble. Mine are all in the Clock already. It wants new ones, from someone who notices things."

Noelle thought of the sleeps, the doors, the baubles. "I just count things."

"Counting is noticing, with numbers," said Tilli. "Only if you'd like to try."

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High above, a little door in the tower flew open, and a brass bird shot out on a spring.

"Is it time yet?" it shrieked, very pleased with itself.

"That's my voice," said Noelle.

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"It's everything anyone ever said while waiting, with feathers on," said Tilli. "Tonight it borrowed yours."

The bird flapped to the key and counted the chimes: "Seven eight nine ten eleven twelve DONE!" The key did not budge.

"That is not counting," said Tilli. "That is falling downstairs with numbers."

The bird landed on Noelle's shoulder and tugged at her sleeve. "Don't bother with keys! Shove the big hand round to morning! It's snowing out there already! One shove, and you're there! Cuckoo!"

Noelle wanted morning. Of course she wanted morning. She had wanted it since breakfast, and for nineteen sleeps before that.

The big hand hung just above her, trembling. She only meant to touch it.

It jumped one minute.

There was no bong. There was a clank, like a spoon dropped in a sink. And at the very end of the avenue, in the smallest house of all, a window Noelle had not noticed went black.

She knew that window. It had her tree in it.

She ran the whole length of the avenue and pressed her nose to the cold glass. Inside, dimly, was the kitchen at home. The cookies were baked. They were cooled, and stacked on the blue plate. Mum was washing up, not

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humming, because the carol was over.

Noelle had missed the smell. She had missed the first cookie, the one straight off the tray that burns your tongue a little and is the best one.

"Oh," said Noelle. "Is that it?"

Noelle looked at the window for a long moment. The bird leaned against her ear and, for once, said nothing.

Tilli came up beside her, quite out of breath. "Everybody does it once," she said. "I did, in my second December. You get the minute, and there's nothing in it."

"Can I put it back?"

"Nobody can put a minute back," said Tilli. She pushed her glasses up her nose. "There are three left. That's a great deal, really."

Noelle walked back up the avenue, slowly this time, and put both shoulders to the key.

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"One," said Noelle. "Tilli's glasses, slipping down her nose."

Bong.

A window lit below, yellow and small.

"Two. A lamp-post in a scarf."

Bong.

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"Three. Cinnamon, coming out of a gingerbread chimney. Four. A lantern, warm on one cheek."

Bong.

Bong.

The key was moving now. And the bird, in the middle of a cuckoo, stopped.

"Five," said Noelle. "The bird's one bright eye."

Bong.

"Five," said the bird, very small, a beat behind.

"Six. A bootprint, filling up with snow."

"Six," said the bird, getting the number right.

"Seven. One icicle, dripping."

Bong.

Bong.

Half the town was gold.

Then the key stopped.

"Eight," said Noelle. "A sledge with a red rope."

Nothing. Noelle pushed. Tilli pushed. The bird pushed too, which made no difference, but it was nice of it.

"It has had enough lamp-posts and icicles," panted Tilli. "It wants the ones that are yours. Those are heavier."

Noelle shut her eyes.

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"Eight. The chipped red mug."

The key groaned, and turned.

Bong.

"Nine. Snow-wet mittens on the radiator."

Bong.

"Ten. The creak of the third stair."

Bong.

"Eleven. Matchlight on Dad's face."

Bong.

Now the whole town was bright below her, all but one window: the smallest, at the very end of the avenue. And the key would not move at all.

Through that dark glass, a long way off, Noelle could just make out a fireplace, and somebody kneeling at it, lips moving, quite unhurried. She could not hear the words. Not from here.

She turned out one pocket, then the other. Nothing. She had counted everything she had.

Everything but one thing, and it was the thing she had been trying to get rid of all day.

"Twelve," said Noelle, and held out both empty hands. "The waiting. The elves in both slippers and all."

The key went round by itself.

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Nobody pushed the great hands, and nobody held them. They stopped trembling, and walked the last of the way on their own, and stood on midnight exactly. The last chime was so low and so wide that Noelle felt it in both feet before hearing it. It was not a shriek, and it was not a clank. It was one big, warm, round note, and at the end of the avenue the smallest window lit, yellow as butter.

The brass bird, no bigger than a thimble now, rang the very last note itself, once, exactly right, and fluttered into Noelle's pocket.

"On time," whispered Tilli. She took off her glasses and wiped them on her enormous sleeve. "A hundred and six Decembers. On time."

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The next thing Noelle knew was the sofa, and the tree lights.

Biscuit's warm weight lay across Noelle's feet.

From the kitchen came the clink of washing-up. Mum was not humming, because the carol was over.

The cookies were cooled, and stacked on the blue plate. Noelle took one. It was not the first one, and it did not burn her tongue. She ate it slowly all the same, one point of the star at a time.

On Christmas morning, Noelle woke in the grey before the light and crept down to the third stair, as close to the fireplace as the stairs allowed.

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Some moments arrive wrapped. This one arrived in slippers, on the third stair, at ten to seven.

The house was so quiet that Noelle could count what she heard. One: a radiator, ticking as it warmed. Two: the tree, letting go of a single needle. Under the tree the presents sat in their paper, going nowhere. Dad knelt at the hearth and struck a match, slowly, and whispered to the first flame of Christmas. This time Noelle heard every word.

"Stay a little longer," said Dad.

Dad said it to the flame. But Dad was looking up at the tree, at the little glass clock on its high branch.

Noelle kept all four words.

In her pyjama pocket, something no bigger than a thimble gave one tick. And on its high branch the little glass clock, which had been right only twice a day, went on to the next minute. Just the one. It did not hurry.

At the window, the first snow was falling, slowly enough to count.

Out in the drive, a car door shut, once, and past the frosted glass of the front door went a flash of cranberry red: Grandma's scarf, wound round three times.

Biscuit padded down and sat on the fourth stair.

Dad turned round and saw her, and looked at the presents, and at Noelle, and grinned. Then Dad came to the foot of the stairs and whispered, as if it were their secret:

"Is it time yet?"

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Noelle looked at the fire, just catching. She listened to the house: Mum on the landing, humming already. It still felt as if there were elves in both slippers.

"Not yet," said Noelle, and moved over to make room on the stair.

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