

## The Little Grandfather Clock

By Emma Gallagher

Our Dad is driving home from Grandma's the back way, doing rebel, confederate leaps over the unsealed hills behind our orchard. Our headlights are bouncing and light up the stones, the long grass, the shrubs on the roadside, bright white, and if you look out the side window it all whips along into blackness so you're always looking at the next, the next, the next.

We're sharing the seatbelt, my brother and me, and we're not fighting, we're sharing the clock that won't stop chiming; he's got the face and, me, I've got the base and we're clasping it close to our stomachs; and the broken seat-leather cracks at the backs of our bare legs which jump and jolt like dead things out before us; we let them go limp and the dark cab smells of mouldy leaves and rope. Our guts are heaving and being left in the air, then as our bums hit the seats our guts come down with a whoomp! dong! and if our Dad's not careful we'll lose our guts altogether and they'll be all over the clock and the windscreen and what a mess. We're laughing and screaming because it's just chimed thirteen o'clock.

And then we shh.

Our beams dip and lift as we turn slowly into our driveway and we see our lemonwood shelterbelt looking stunned and shaking as if it's hiding someone. Our house is glowing. And there's our Mum moving around inside.

The little grandfather clock is only as long as my whole arm. It's lying on our dining-room table. Chiming and ticking. It's a useless-bugger-of-a-clock with dry, greenish dust in its little corners and carved ridges. Our fingers are all over it, running along each groove, running along all its lines and its curves. And we want to unlatch the little glass door and put our fingers inside to stop the pendulum on its next constant swing; to see which is stronger, us or its ticking; will it crush and split our fingers against its polished insides, or is it a sharp round knife that will slice off our fingerprints, like French people's heads.

But our Dad won't let us tinker with it and we have to make do with racing finger laps up and down the brown wooden body and over the glass face and the windows in the latched door keeping us away from that sickly swinging pendulum. And it makes me think of Uncle John's electric fan; how we're not allowed to put our fingers through the grill to touch the blades even when it's off.

Our Dad's following her around the kitchen, trying for a cuddle, but all he's getting are elbows. She's bashing away at the mashed potato.

He yells out to us, get your sticky fingers out of there, you two. Little monkeys.

My brother says that he hates mashed potato. There are louder bangs from the kitchen.

It's the colour of fantails and sparrows, all pitted and brown; the ones who eat our leftover toast on the lawn. Our Dad's going to wind it twice a day when it's fixed, but tonight it won't stop chiming the hours and half-hours on and on. I'm counting all the hours on my fingers; and my bother's licking his and dragging them over the clock face; glaring from under his eyebrows at our Dad's back in the kitchen. He has greenish dust all over his fingertips.

The little grandfather clock chimes that it's already tomorrow, but no one else has heard.

I heard you, she says to our Dad. She's whacking the masher against the pot, but the clock chimes are louder.

What?

Turn that bloody clock off, I can't stand it.

Won't get it to go again if I do that.

I heard you coming over the hills. And I don't know why you want that clock.

He doesn't say anything but moves in for a cuddle.

You think slowing down at the driveway is going to fool me? That road.

And then all I hear is them talking lowly and the pots and plates banging. Our Dad walks out of the kitchen quietly.

He's hanging the clock above my brother's head to see how it looks.

But, what if it falls on my head?

It won't.

It might.

Don't be a girl.

Come here, my Mum calls to me from the kitchen. She fingers my t-shirt.

I pull away. She has a bit of potato in her hair.

That's too small for you.

No, it's not.

I think it's time for a bra. She whispers the last word.

No.

You're getting to that age, she says. Her eyebrows are raised and her lips are trying to hold in a smile.

I'm already walking out the door.

God, that ticking, says Mum. She's holding our steaming plates in her hands.

He says she'll get used to it.

The clock is wrapped up in a blanket and shut away in the hallway. I can still hear it all through dinner. Muffled dongs from behind the door.

I can tell he wants to go back to tinkering on the little grandfather clock on the dining-room table, but he can't because my brother won't eat his mashed potato and we have to sit at the table until it's all gone; and so Dad keeps making jokes; and Mum won't look at him, but keeps staring at the unfinished plate and calling my brother a little tinker. I have to count out loud to keep track of all the hours and I'm thinking we'll be waiting here for years. Our Mum slams down her knife and fork and stares at our Dad.

He tells me to be quiet. But he's looking at her.

My brother crosses his eyes at me. I kick him under the table and he yells.

Our Dad tells him to shut it. And eat his potato. They're still looking at each other.

I want them to stop.

I think about making a kissie-kissie noise at them. But instead I mouth out counting the chimes to my brother and spoon in my mashed potato at the same time. He can't reach me because his legs are too short, but he makes the table jump. They don't notice.

He tells her how Grandma had forgotten about the clock.

He's quiet for a bit, then says that the clock used to sit on the wall above their dining-room table and Aunty Judith would kick him with her purposely uncut toenails hidden beneath the tablecloth. And do you remember that cold Tuesday morning when Aunty Judith turned up with that man, who wasn't Uncle John, well, apparently they're living up north, but don't tell Grandma. They're doing alright.

My brother and me look at each other because who knew Aunty Judith was still alive and kicking?

Then he tells of the time Aunty Judith brought home a red and white bikini and had kept it hidden behind the drawers in her room. She was wearing it at the river and talking to boys when their father had driven past and seen her. And she saw him. It was late when she got home and she'd walked in quietly, and Dad says, all he could hear was the ticking of the little grandfather clock. Their father held out his hand. Real quiet. And Grandma wouldn't look up. He remembers her pushing the meat around her plate softly.

Aunty Judith handed over the red and white material and he had gone straight outside and burnt it. They'd watched from the window, all the orange sparks flying out of the tin drum.

The next day Dad had seen her at a new spot at the river, further down, more concealed from the road. Auntie Judith wearing her red and white bikini.

She had just handed their father scraps of red and white material. And married Uncle John pretty soon after that.

I've lost track of all the hours. I'd forgotten to count. But it must already be the end of the week and his mashed potato is getting cold, a fish-silver top on it. I can feel the days sliding past, wet and watery, but the little grandfather clock won't stop. The months moving on like abacus buttons, and clattering into each other at the end.

But my brother still won't pick up his fork.

How will he grow without eating his mashed potato, says our Mum. Won't grow up big without his spuds.

*But he does.*

*He's grown huge in his chair, and hairy and strong; he still looks at Mum from under his eyebrows which have grown together in tangles. I don't know him anymore. Everything's covered in film of greenish dust. My hands are huge and my fingernails painted, but there's no ring; Mum and Dad are getting smaller and bent, fading into their chairs; she's saying, tick, tick, tick. The orchard's been pulled out and there was no one hiding in the lemonwoods after all; the old road's been levelled because it killed a young couple speeding over the hills on a Saturday night; and Grandma's long gone. Aunty Judith is living with a woman who makes pots on the coast. And the little grandfather clock is still ticking away.*

There's a fly walking across the potato. He's not going to eat it now.

It's time for bed. We can hear Dad laying the little grandfather clock on the table and the scrapes of Mum washing the dishes and their low murmuring. I wake up with bad dreams and all I can hear is loud ticking. It's echoing around our little house as I'm falling back to sleep, wondering what time it is.

Our Dad pulls the little grandfather clock out from under the bed in Grandma's locked room at the very back of her garage. It's dead. It's a silent, little coffin. Useless-bugger-of-a-clock, says Grandma, her voice is travelling through the blinds of her kitchen window, along the watering cans, brooms and smokers' plants, and then in through the swirly, yellow-glass door, that we have pressed our noses against thousands of times, always out of bounds, and finally reaches us thin and worn.

But my brother and me, we don't care about the clock. We're looking for Aunty Judith, who we haven't seen for two Christmases and have decided that she's got lost and buried in here under all the boxes; and we're not sure whether we're looking for a whole cold lady, or whether she'll be single bones wrapped in newspaper among the teacups and old undies. Dad is already opening the clock and shakes out a soft, dead bumblebee, and has found the key, and begins to wind the little grandfather clock.

It won't stop. Eleven, twelve, thirteen o'clock; it is bouncing on our laps, my brother's and mine. It's playing tricks with the time. The little grandfather clock speeds up the night with its constant chiming, calls out the hours passing, pulls the clouds faster across late summer sky; and we scream by in our ute stirring the dust up behind us.