

## The Clock Stood Still

Our beloved aunt recently passed away, aged 97, the last few months of her life clouded by a painful fight against rapidly-spreading cancer. A lady of indomitable courage, she retained a cheerful and positive outlook right through all the suffering and challenges of advancing age, and remained mentally agile and sharp right to the last, always with compassion and concern for other people. She had lived in her bungalow in Caerleon, South Wales, since 1958, alone for the last 29 years since the death of her husband. Not having children of her own, she had followed closely the lives of her nephews and nieces as they matured.

So it was that my sister Judy and I went to her funeral, and experienced the mixed emotions of sadness at her loss, relief that she was now a free spirit at peace, and joy in celebrating the memories of her long and fulfilled life. Particularly poignant, once all the proceedings were over, was the visit to her house: Judy, and our cousin Trish, being executors for her will, were faced with the unenviable task of sorting out all her belongings, and making endless decisions about which items might be suitable for family members to receive, before handing over the ultimate house clearance to the professionals, so that the proceeds could go to the specified charities. Inevitably, it was a difficult and emotionally charged time.

The light and spacious living room emanated a heavy and palpable silence. Through the large windows on two sides we looked out on to the luxurious and immaculate garden which Gwen had always so loved. After sitting in contemplation for a little while, we scanned the furniture and items in the room, and my sister asked me if there was anything I would like to have. I had not even felt like considering this question, and needed some prompting. "How about that clock", she said, pointing to the top of the attractive wooden bureau in the corner. I looked at a medium-sized brass coloured clock, housed in a transparent plastic dome, about ten inches high, shaped like a bell-jar. Its white face, four inches in diameter, with Roman numerals, and the word *Emperor* written in black italic script just above the centre, stood on two slender posts, with a third vertical rod suspended from the back of the

mechanism, between and behind them. This did not reach the base, and had what looked like a spiral groove cut into its length. Four small balls were attached at right angles to the bottom of it. The clock was motionless and silent, without a flicker of life, the hands frozen in time at eleven o' clock, and it seemed to reflect the aura of the room, and our dark thoughts. (It was around eleven that Gwen had passed away peacefully on that Saturday evening, nearly three weeks ago.)

I assented, and we bundled the clock into a large jiffy bag.

When I returned home to Surrey a couple of days later, I examined the clock. Not being sure whether it still worked, I experimented by fitting a new battery. To my delight, there was immediate movement. Past memories now began to come back. The clock's mechanism is unique, quite unlike anything else I have seen. Achieving the same end result as a pendulum, the four balls twist round horizontally, describing two complete circles before briefly coming to a halt, and then turning back in the reverse direction. (Each phase, I discovered, lasts for exactly six seconds, so the balls turn backwards and forwards five times per minute.) There is no second hand, and a very faint regular tick, with a slightly louder "clunk" which happens half way through each cycle. I have no idea what was the origin of this clock, or how long Gwen had owned it, but I do remember noticing it on the occasions when I used to take Mum (Gwen's younger sister) from her home in Clevedon, Somerset, to visit Gwen. (Sadly these visits came to an end about four years ago, Mum having become too frail to cope with the travelling.)

The clock's motion has a meditative, almost mesmeric quality, and while the two sisters were chatting away, I would stare into it, allowing my thoughts to wander.

This clock has now become a treasured item on top of my piano, and forms an enduring link with auntie. Though its motion seems to be superficially smooth and continuous, there is a motionless instant just before the balls reverse direction, when it can truly be said "the clock stood still." There is stillness within motion, and motion that comes out of stillness, which resonates with the never-ending cycle of life and death, and the natural order of things.

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