

## The Clock

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A thick, smoky fog cloaked the house. Ava peered through the window but could not distinguish the tangerine tree from her room. She opened the window and the aroma of her mother's hyacinths mingled with the faint smell of shay butter lotion she routinely applied to her dark brown hair. Without the tree, the little garden seemed lonely and bare. Ava closed the window and retreated to the safety of her bed. Eleven o'clock. She decided to call it a day. Her eyes were heavy with sleepless nights and her body numb with fatigue. Two months had gone by since her grandmother, Mami Tati, had quietly passed away in her sleep at the age of eighty-five. Two *entire* months! Day after day she helplessly fought the sadness that had now become her sole companion. Mami Tati had been her real mother, her best friend and confidant. Now, without her, Ava felt like a discarded doll, suddenly deprived of those comforting hugs that smelled of warm cocoa with cinnamon. Her mother, Mami Tati's only daughter, had suggested that Ava busied herself at the bazaar during the afternoons after school. An active body, the mother reasoned, would surely wear down the efforts of the mind. "Sure," Ava replied to herself. She would comply with her mother's wishes, as usual. But the brain has its own will. And thus, night after night, Ava would wonder off to the magic moments spent with Mami Tati: there was the time when she learned to make apple pie; the summer afternoon she received the blouse Mami Tati embroidered for her, the quiet evenings full of Biblical stories...

Ten past twelve. The piercing sound of the neighbor's black retriever's barking brought Ava back to the reality of her bed. She shivered a little. The fog outside seemed to have thickened. She could only see the greenish-white paleness of the garden's lights now. Ava pulled her sky blue drapes together and meticulously inspected the line of contact between them for small openings. Since she was a child, Ava firmly believed that if she made sure that no gaps were left, she would be safe from the faces that would pry into her room from the garden window. Silly thoughts, but nevertheless... She quickly took off her worn out jeans,

her black sweater and shoes and carefully placed them in her closet. She then put on her the flannel pajama pants and matching long-sleeve shirt that Mami Tati had given to her last Christmas. She extended the covers on her bed, tucked her pillow and rearranged the ceramic elephant figurines on her night table. Finally, she sunk under her covers and turned off the table lamp. She closed her eyes and felt herself drift into a soothing peace.

After some time, Ava felt an extraordinary weight on her chest that yanked the woman from her deep sleep. She opened her eyes and looked at the clock on the wall. She realized that she had slept past her usual waking time, eight o'clock. Outside, it was already getting hot and the birds were playfully singing their morning songs. The pressure on her chest seemed to increase as she tried to fill her lungs with the fresh air of the new day. She tried to sit up in her bed but realized that she was incapable. *Something* was holding her down. A cold sweat broke on her white forehead. Her hazel brown eyes blinked twice in search for an answer. What is happening? Why can't I move? The pain had now spread through the cartilage of her ribs. Fear began to settle in Ava's mind, as she tried to get up again, to no avail. What could possibly be wrong? She had gone to sleep and had woken up completely paralyzed... Or had she? Her mind was racing. She tried to reassure herself. Don't panic, don't panic... I am sure this is just a temporary situation, I am sure there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this. Perhaps I am still sleeping and dreaming that I actually woke up...It's all some kind of twisted nightmare. Don't panic, please don't panic. She looked at the tiny fluorescent stars that were glued all over her ceiling, took two deep breaths and realized that she had indeed woken up long ago and that she could not move away from her bed. An invisible grip was definitely pinning her down. It then occurred to her that maybe if she moved gradually, she would be able to make some progress. She decided to wiggle her toes first. She looked down at the shape of her tiny feet underneath her covers and concentrated on moving them. Nothing happened. Her toes were made of iron. She then wanted to turn her head towards the side and see her hands. No movement whatsoever. Like some abandoned machine that frozen with years of exposure and rust. This is unbearable. She decided she was going insane after all...

Ava began to sweat profusely. She felt her flannel pajamas stick to her body. Her chest was covered in perspiration. Could it be that she was dead and did not know it? The deafening palpitations of her heart indicated otherwise... She literally felt her blood pump through her arteries and work overtime. The pain made it harder and harder to breathe. She gasped for air. Instead, she felt that she was suffocating. As in that time she had fallen in the adult's pool at the beach house, some friend of the family jumped in and pulled me out, just in time. Ever since that day, the smell of chlorine would cause Ava to feel that she was choking. Ok, surely she was dying. One is never prepared for such moments. But how could this be? She was only twenty-four years old... Well, people die at all ages... The idea made her dizzy. Something cold brushed by her face. She was unable to turn her head towards the window. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw *something* move. She was not simply dying; she was being

killed or worse... She had checked the drapes, though. There were no cracks. She did not hear anything throughout the night. The nausea was making her sick. If she could not move, what could she do if there was someone else in the room? She was completely helpless. She could not even scream for help... The room began to spin around her bed. Something was unquestionably very wrong. She wished Mami Tati were there with her. She would know what to say or do... Or... Could it be that Mami Tati was the one there? Perhaps she was trying to make some kind of contact? But she... Ava began to tremble. This was so ironic. She could not move at will but now her thin limbs were dancing rhythmically to these macabre thoughts. And if it were really her... Why had she come back so unexpectedly? Ava was terrified. Her heart became the dominating drum in one of those African dances. Boom, boom, boom... A hissing sound in her ears made her feel light-headed. She missed Mami Tati so much. Nevertheless, she had never conceived the idea of seeing her again, or *feeling her* again for that matter. She was not ready. She never would be...

Ten o'clock. And then it happened. Ava saw herself floating above her bed. She could perceive the stiffness of her body on the bed. Somehow, she was contemplating her own image from above. This was surreal. Could it really be her observing her own body? Below, she felt all her paralyzed muscles contract into one, shapeless mass. Above, she felt relieved and light-weighted. She was free. She could not see anyone else in the room though. This was getting worse and worse by the hour. Ava felt an urgent need to run away; to escape that depressing room. She wanted to move her legs again and run miles away... She still could not move. She now knew that she was doomed. She looked at her face again. She had never realized how small her eyes were, the fine curve of her neck. She could now see all the small details that she had never noticed before. The new freckle on her left cheek, the irregularity of her eyebrows and the down slope of her mouth, Mami Tati's unmistakable mark. She saw the tears flow down her cheeks and leave bright, miniature lines on her face. Her eyes were fixed on her. Above, she could see her transparent self-approach the ceiling. She looked like one of those lost balloons in a child's fair. She was going to burst. Terror inserts its greedy fingers in one's heart and squeezes so hard, enough to destroy beautiful past memories. Ava made up her mind. She was going to fight it back, whatever it was. She closed her eyes and gathered all her strength. She pictured herself screaming, with all the strength of her lungs. Slowly, her mouth opened a bit. A painful, faint noise ushered through her throat. She had to do better than that. A few minutes went by. She tried again and this time, as in slow motion, she uttered a sound that seemed to come from the very same guts of the Earth. Something exploded in her ears and she opened her eyes. She no longer saw herself above her own body. She was gone. Her ghostly image had vanished.

Suddenly, the door flew open and her mother rushed to her side. She looked pale and her face was contorted in horror.

- Ava, are you all right? I heard this awful noise...- The mother's voice was uncertain. No answer.

- Ava? Ava, please say something! What on God's name happened here?

Why won't you say anything? - Her mother was now crying. Ava could see her eyes redden but could not tell her how she felt. She felt dizzy again and realized that her mother's voice seemed more distant, until it was lost in a murmur of confusing noises. When she next opened her eyes, her mother was still by her side. It was now getting dark outside and the birds had stopped their cheerful singing. Her mother was quiet. She told Ava that she had been taken to the local hospital, where she had been rushed to the emergency room. The doctors could not find anything wrong with her. She had been given a sedative. The diagnosis on her chart read, uncertainly, "*Possible anxiety disorder with panic attack manifestation. Cause unknown.*"