

Icarus

The air was cold as Clara Dickens entered the house. Outside the wind had been restless as winter's characteristic stagnancy gave way to an anxious stirring. But here, in the imposing mansion surrounded by forest at the end of Tempus street, the atmosphere was still.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Clara heard the echoes reverberating through the walls, as if the shattered house itself were alive, time its heartbeat. If she were honest, Clara had been expecting a bit more. Abandoned houses were usually known for ghosts and magnificent murders, not overgrown plants suffocating the half crumbled walls. *Extraordinary* was what Clara sought from life, not this. *So many vines. So much green.* In fact, the whole place looked so decomposed Clara wasn't sure what she had expected at all. *Creaky floor boards. Dust and cobwebs everywhere. Pictures on the fireplace. Broken windows - pictures on the fireplace?* Adorning the fireplace were at least nine beautifully framed pictures of a couple. *No dust.* Clara picked up the central photo of a beaming bride and groom. The photo was in black and white. The woman's face was blurred but she looked as if she were in her late twenties, not far from 17 year old Clara. Clara admired the woman's Victorian style dress. It was precisely what she would envision wearing if she ever married. Clara wondered if it were *just* the dress that lured her to the woman; she seemed awfully familiar..

“Lovely isn’t she?”

An older man dressed in formal attire with hair starting to grey stood at the opposite end of the room, staring. His wrinkles framed his face as if strokes of a paintbrush had placed them there rather than time’s unforgiving effects. Clara stood motionless as his grey eyes remained unwaveringly locked on her.

“Forgive me.” The man moved toward her, resting his coat on the couch along with a set of keys.

“You’re likely freezing. I’ll start the fire.” He moved next to her and knelt before the fireplace to set the blaze.

“You’re him.”

The man looked up with a knowing gaze.

“These pictures. They’re you.”

“Yes.” The fire’s warmth began to thaw the air around them. “Would you care for some tea?”

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The two sat across from each other, the only sound the clanking of spoons against china. Clara broke the silence. “Why are the pictures different?” The man smiled. Each picture featured the same couple but in entirely different atmospheres: some in black and white, others colour, some featuring mediaeval clothing, others styles Clara had never seen before.

“My name is Edgar. That’s my wife. We’re travellers.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Of time.”

Clara set down her tea. Anyone else would have written the man off as crazy, but Clara was intrigued. This was it: the *extraordinary* she was looking for. “Do you expect me to believe you?”

“You? Yes.” The man smiled warmly, observing Clara as she took in the claim.

Clara had grown up believing there must be more to existence than bits of everyday, average life.

Clara was a firm believer that if her life was not great, then it was nothing. And here greatness stood: staring her in the face in the form of a borderline grey haired man, in a suit, in an abandoned house, sipping tea. *Well, greatness wouldn't be great if it arose from normal circumstances.* “Tell me how.”

“How we bend time?”

“Well, there are too many paradoxes. If time is linear, each alteration of the past jeopardises your ability to make the choices that led you to alter the past. And if time doesn't exist linearly the way we observe it, it's one big loop, meaning each occurrence leads to the next until we're back where we started.”

“Ah, but that would erase the existence of free will.”

Clara furrowed her brow, following the logic. Edgar smiled and settled into the moment, unburdening his pocket of a set of keys before readjusting further into the couch cushion. The worn brass key ring he gently placed beside himself on the seat. Clara's eyes fixated on the image as her mind flashed through solution after solution to include self-determination. Finally, curiosity dominated hubris.

“Then how?”

Edgar's smile only grew at the question.

“You're evaluating this on the supposition that one reality exists.”

The furrowed brow resumed, magnified. After a moment, Clara's eyes lit up.

“So, it's not a rewind. It's a jump!” The man beamed as she continued. “You jump from one time to another, creating an entirely new reality without dismantling the one you came from.”

The man's smile softened and Clara realised a sadness to him. There was weight in every movement and look, as if the man had aged a hundred years. “Does it affect ageing?” Clara asked hesitantly.

“No, no. I've lived my years honestly. The heart though... The heart ages with no regard to time or body.” Faintly, Clara heard a coughing from the far corners of the tall, crooked house.

“Edgar, is someone else here?”

The man looked up with a light in his eyes. “It is wonderful to hear you say my name.”

Clara suddenly realised the coldness of the atmosphere.

“I really didn't mean to intrude..” Her stomach echoed with some other foreign feeling. “Do you live here?” Clara knew the answer must be no, the house was too demolished for a home.

“Temporarily. My wife and I met here. This is where we became friends, where she came up with her theory of time, where we discovered how to tame it.”

“And where is she now?” The man laughed. *The man laughed?* As set as Clara was on achieving greatness, this *was* a stranger claiming he could time travel. “You've been so hospitable but I think my aunt will be looking for me. She doesn't know where I wandered off to.” Clara stood as she spoke, and began to make her way toward the vine-wrapped door.

“No, no, please, it's raining now, wait for the storm to pass.” The man glanced at his wristwatch.

“I really-”

“Give it five minutes and see if the rain won’t slow.” The man’s eyes seemed desperately earnest. “You wouldn’t want to miss a chance at learning about something as extraordinary as time travel.” *Extraordinary.*

Clara knew she would regret leaving the second she returned to her average life. With a furrowed brow, she glanced from the man to the door, and back again to the man.

“Alright.” Clara slowly made her way back to her seat and picked up her tea. “Only a little while.”

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BOOM

A bolt of lighting struck a large tree by the house, interrupting a conversation. Clara heard a creaking from just outside until suddenly a huge limb from the victim tree had come down, rustling the vines hugging the large oak door, and blocking the exit.

Clara stared in shock at the door she could no longer walk through.

No more than five minutes had passed since the man had convinced Clara to stay.

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The room Clara was to sleep in was large, unlike the narrow and winding staircases and hallways that seemed to shrink in width with every step.

“Unfortunately, whoever built this old thing didn’t care to think they’d need more than one exit. For as large as the thing is, there are no backdoors.” The man had offered to allow Clara to stay

the night until the tree could be removed and the large oak door could be opened. The girl moved toward a large stained glass window at the far end of the room.

“We’re on the sixth floor. Jumping down would be painful at the least.” The man continued, idle-minded. “Besides, the windows have all been boarded up to protect from the cold.” On closer inspection, Clara could see that the man was right. Panels of wood could be seen, blocking from the other side of the glass. He gave the same small smile as always and laid some clothes on the bed. “Sleepwear.”

“Thank you.” Again, there was that cough echoing through the halls. The man furrowed his brow and glanced backward at the door. Clara decided not to ask about the sound again. The man was clearly sensitive about the issue, so she wouldn’t pry.

“Let me know if you’ll need anything else. Goodnight, Miss. Dickens.” And he was gone. Clara took a breath. From her pocket she pulled the set of keys. She simply couldn’t resist taking them from the cushion. After all, *abandoned houses cannot be extraordinary if their secrets remain locked away*. Within her own room, everything was accessible, but she recalled an intriguing locked drawer she had passed in one of the many halls she had promenaded to reach her room. She moved toward the door but paused at the handle, her eyes fixed on the lace nightgown left for her. The colour was a faded white, but given the intact intricacies on the edges of the bodice and skirt, Clara concluded it had been handled with great care. She brushed a thumb across the fabric and contemplated whether digging through locked drawers was an unforgivable betrayal of this stranger’s kindness. Her brush morphed to lazy circles along the lace. *Soft. Delicate*. Everything contrary to Clara with her stolen key ring.

She slipped into the gown before leaving the room.

As Clara retraced her steps, she wondered why the man had decorated the halls as they were. Each passageway seemed to hold a different motif than the last. Along one was a collection of preserved insects in small glass frames. Clara walked past what must've been hundreds of butterflies and dragonflies of every colour imaginable. Beetles, bees, scorpions, and spiders: the creatures covered every inch of the wall with their winding legs, bulgy eyes, and protruding fangs. Curiously observing each being, Clara stopped by a grouping of moths. She couldn't help her jealousy for the insects' immortality. Such fragile creatures, protected from decay by a layer of glass. Here, they would be noticed and admired for their beauty and uniqueness. *They are extraordinary and treated as such.* The taxidermy they endured exchanged a mediocre life of crawling aimlessly at others' feet with a legacy of worthiness. They had been chosen for display. *Everyone wants to be chosen, even if it means being used.* Clara reached forward to touch the things' translucent cage. Suddenly, a moth startled and flew from its position among its equals, nearly brushing Clara's cheek as it stumbled away. The live creature had poised itself among his synthetically immortal friends. She watched the imposter beat its wings, clumsily drifting down the hall. Clara felt sorry for the thing.

The next hallway seemed more like it belonged in an art museum than a household. Portraits were crammed beside each other so that the wall behind them could hardly be seen. A queerness filled Clara to the brim as she realised each portrait, big and small, modern and traditional, was of the old man's wife. None featured her as any older than her mid or late twenties, and Clara assumed she must have died young.

In the next hall, the everpresent coughing grew louder, and Clara found herself among hundreds of clocks. Grandfather clocks lined the room; their pendulums seemed to make the room itself sway. Mechanical clocks with gears protruding joined the chorus of *tick tick tick*

with robotic accuracy. Cuckoo clocks waited eagerly to show off their trick. Each clock on the wall echoed the same message of time's passing, making Clara's heart beat faster with every *tick*. At the end of the long hallway, Clara saw a lit up room, and hearing Edgar's voice, she edged forward along the wall. Peering around the corner, she could see Edgar knelt beside a bed, a figure lying there, barely moving. Faintly, Clara could hear a woman's voice. She made out the phrase: "You mustn't persuade her." Clara crept forward, hiding in the shadows as she heard some small protest from Edgar before the woman spoke again. "Stop trying to hold on. You cannot change time." Clara saw the woman's hand reach out, Edgar leaning in. "If you listen and let it, time will change you, and that is enough."

BONG

Clara was startled by the clocks' announcement of midnight and hurried away from the room and the *BONG BONG BONG BONG* growing fainter as she scurried away. *That hand*. Clara's view had kept her from seeing the woman's face, *but her hand...*

As she rounded a corner, Clara found herself in a hallway of dozens and dozens of cabinets. Each a different size, colour, and design, each with a lock. Although tempted to use the keys to unlock whatever secrets were held here, Clara kept moving until she finally found the hall she sought. Pictures of Edgar and his wife adorned the hallway. Again, an uncertainty bubbled up from within her at the sight of the wife. At every glance, there was a new era the couple occupied. Clara stopped at an ornately designed table. Above it was a large picture of the two in a mediaeval ballroom, dancing under an ornately painted ceiling, a crowd watching the couple in awe. Clara smiled at the thought of the time travelling couple asking a bypasser to shoot their photograph in an era before cameras. Her gaze dropped to what she had come here for: a small, locked drawer with the letters *E & C* engraved.

It took Clara quite some time to finally fit one of the numerous keys into the cabinet's keyhole. When she finally heard a *click*, Clara opened the drawer to many groans and creaks before sitting to admire its contents. The atmosphere became cold again and Clara wished she had foregone changing into the lace nightgown. Inside the drawer were more pictures, but this time of a much younger Edgar. She picked up a folded picture depicting him as a teenager and smiled seeing him in modern day clothing. He sat on the steps of a large, crumbled house with many vines. *This house*. Clara recalled what the man had told her: *"My wife and I met here. This is where we became friends, where she came up with her theory of time, where we discovered how to tame it."* Expecting to see Edgar's wife how he had first met her, Clara unfolded the picture.

In the picture before her, true as the chill in the air, sat Clara.

She dropped the thing with a gasp and crawled backwards away from it, hitting the wall and causing a picture to come crashing down. Clara ignored the broken glass beside her and sat terrified and transfixed on the picture across from her. Could it be? Was she really the same as the woman who occupied each picture, was represented in each portrait, and haunted each smile Edgar gave? From above her, Clara heard a coughing followed by footsteps. The ceiling sprinkled down dust as Edgar passed over her. Clara knew he must've heard the glass break and was on his way to find her. She scurried forward, snatching up the picture and a dozen more like it from the drawer before hurrying away.

The pictures clutched in her fist felt as if they were burning through flesh as Clara made her way through halls she'd never seen before, too shaken to find her way back to the room she came from. Clara rounded a corner and immediately gasped at the sight of herself. Her breathing slowed as her gaze was drawn around the hall to see that both walls of this hall were entirely

covered in mirrors. Clara observed each slightly altered clone of herself as she tiptoed past. When Clara looked up, she realised the ceiling, too, had been covered. The back of her neck burned with the feel of her own gaze upon her. Clara heard the footsteps drawing nearer and looked all around for an escape. Seeing a door, she quickly fumbled through her keys as the footsteps became louder and louder. Sweat dripped from her fingertips as one by one, each key refused to unlock the door. The footsteps paused and Clara heard the faint groaning and creaking of a drawer closing. *The hall of pictures*. He wasn't far. And by the state she left the drawer in, Clara guessed that Edgar now knew of her discovery. Clara was halfway through the key ring now. The footsteps resumed, this time twice their former speed as Edgar's call of "Clara?" echoed through the house. Finally, a *click* sounded and Clara forced the door open, revealing a staircase leading upward. She hurried onto the stairs and closed the door, wincing at its creaking. Behind her, a few feet up was a window. Unlike the others, this window was not boarded shut and provided a passageway for the moonlight to end its long journey, barely reaching Clara to give the space a dim glow. The footsteps were suddenly less muffled and Clara knew he was in the hall of mirrors. Edgar's footsteps paused outside the door. Clara tried to stifle her shallow and heavy breathing, suppressing her urge to run up the stairs and away from the man. Her fist trembled as she attempted perfect stillness. Faintly, a cough echoed through the house, followed by a woman's weak call: "Edgar?"

"Yes, coming!" Edgar called back, and was gone. Clara let out her air and used her empty hand to pry her fingers from their furled position around the pictures. It hadn't been her imagination. Clara was in each photo with Edgar. She recalled the familiarity she had felt toward the woman in the earlier pictures and threw the crumpled things down, pulling at her hair to redirect her headache. When she had gotten her breathing under control, Clara looked down at the scattered

things at the bottom of the staircase. She had to get out. Trembling, she crawled toward the window, groaning as she heaved the ancient thing open, inviting a gust of cold air into the room. Shivering in her nightgown, Clara peered out the window, looking at the snow three stories below her. She couldn't jump, but the limb of a tree extended perfectly to the base of the windowsill. She could crawl out onto it, climb down, and trudge home in the snow and away from this place forever. Clara made her way out and sat on the windowsill, when she caught sight of a moth dancing in the moonlight next to her.

The creature landed on the skirt of her gown, and Clara gently scooped it onto her finger.

Extraordinary.

The girl sat looking at the moth for a long while. Clara didn't know much, but she knew she had to be *something*. And for as strange, disturbing, and terrifying as the house was, it was a chance at *something*.

The moth flew away, and taking a deep breath, Clara turned back to the staircase and made her way up. After a long walk, Clara reached the end. A blank wall ended the staircase, nothing but a small indent in it to hold a single candle and a matchbox. As the light from the window barely reached the top of the stairs, Clara lit the candle and searched the wall for any hidden components. *Nothing*. Clara furrowed her brows and turned to make her way back down when something brushed across her cheek. Clara reached out to find a rope hanging from the shallow ceiling. Looking up, she realised she stood directly below a trapdoor to an attic. She gave the rope a tug and the door opened. Setting the candle on the floor of the hidden room, she pulled herself up into the space. The stagnancy was tangible. As Clara dusted off her skirt, stifled a cough, and retrieved her light, she wondered if stillness could be held by hand. If it could be grasped, moulded, tossed like some child's plaything. Clara moved the candle around, searching

for items in the pitch black. As she moved deeper into the attic, she realised it was relatively large. She passed by a child's toy bear, covered in dust. Next she found an old clock, its glass shattered but the *tick tick tick* still faintly sounding. Draped over a chair, she saw the ball gown featured in the picture of Edgar and his wife dancing. It was filled with holes from moths and insects. Clara made her way through the space, finding trinkets and keepsakes of all shapes and sizes until she reached the end of the attic. Clara nearly tripped as she stumbled into something at her feet. Clara bent down and a foul smell rose to meet her. She drew her candle across a long bag. A knot tied in her throat. At the very end of the object, Clara drew back the wrapping material.

Clara let out a shriek, dropping the candle and leaving her in darkness, but the image was still there. The boy, from the photo of young Clara and Edgar on the steps of the house. Clara crawled away, running into desks and knocking over lamps, getting tangled in clothing and ripping apart cobwebs. *Edgar. A much younger Edgar.* Clara tried to free herself from the smell of him with every desperate inch. Her ears filled with the unmistakable sound of thunder, the lightning strike illuminating the room enough for Clara to finally find her entry point. She dove out of the attic and flew down the stairs, tears streaming down her face. Surely Edgar had heard her scream but she didn't care. Seeing the window ahead of her, she scrambled out toward the branch: her escape. Clara gasped as she nearly fell out the window. The branch was gone. The lightning had struck this tree; the branch had fallen and with it Clara's chance of freedom. Gasping for air, she turned back into the house and scampered down the stairs, trampling the scattered photos at the bottom of the path. She grasped for the doorknob and opened it to reveal-
"Hello, Clara."

"You... you murderer!" Edgar smiled sadly.

“Come, I’ll tell you everything.”

Clara shook her head violently and backed away from the man.

Edgar glanced at the open window and back at Clara. “What other choice do you have?”

He was right.

Clara couldn’t leave.

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The two sat across from each other, the only sound the clanking of spoons against china.

Edgar broke the silence. “What do you want most in life?”

Clara looked up from the teacup in her hands, finding herself on the same couch as before, next to the same, cold fireplace as she first saw. Her tear stains glowed against the angry red of her face as she looked Edgar in the eyes. “To go home.”

“To be *extraordinary*. You hate home. You hate your average, mediocre life. A life lived without greatness is no better than an insect’s.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Clara spoke through gritted teeth.

“Your ambition is why you bent time. We were kids, and you mastered time!” Edgar’s eyes lit up, fond with memory. “We met here; I was only 16. You came in just as you did today, to my secret hideaway I’ve escaped to since I was a boy. We met here every day, again, and again, and again for an entire summer, until finally you cracked the code to my project, and we travelled everywhere together. We left the ordinary numbness of our everyday lives and lived extraordinarily for twelve years together.” Edgar’s smile beamed, and his eyes were soft.

“Don’t you want that life?”

Clara glanced at the photos on the mantelpiece. “And what happened after the twelve years?” Edgar’s face filled with disappointment at the question. “Why does it matter?” Clara’s glare forced Edgar to answer. “After twelve years, you get sick. I tried to save you but I couldn’t.” Edgar’s sadness was replaced by desperate optimism. “But I’ve come back for you! We can be together again!”

Clara fought the sadness that developed in her as she looked into the old man’s hopelessly devoted eyes. “How many times have you come back for me?”

Edgar seemed lost. “What do you mean?”

“What number am I?” Clara’s eyes brimmed with tears. “How many versions of yourself have you killed so that you could take his place? How many versions of me have you persuaded to join you?” Clara’s voice began to break. “How many times have you watched me die?”

Edgar seemed as if he were in another world. He looked around confused, searching for the answer, until he found Clara’s eyes again. “If Icarus had survived the fall, would he fly again?”

A coughing sounded from the corners of the house.

Clara realised this was her chance. They weren’t alone. If she could get to the woman, she could have a chance at leaving. Edgar saw this realisation in Clara’s eyes. “Clara, no.” He warned. The two stared for a moment, not sure who would move first. Clara jumped from her seat and ran toward the stairwell, Edgar following behind, yelling for her to stop.

“Help me! Help me, please!” Clara shouted, hoping the woman would hear. She made her way through a hallway with dozens of lamps, candles, and hanging light fixtures, a hallway of thousands of notes plastered to the walls, each ending in:

Love,

Clara

and finally through the hall covered in clocks, all ticking in unison. With each *tick* Clara became more aware of her need to find the woman. “HELP!” She screamed. With reckless abandon, she fled toward the room she had seen the woman in earlier and flung herself on the bed, sobbing into the sheets. “Please, please, you have to help me. He’s a murderer. He’s insane. Please!” She felt a fragile hand rest on her head, brushing her hair with tender care, and her breathing slowed. Another hand came to grab her chin, cautiously lifting it to face the woman. Their eyes met. Comfort and familiarity overwhelmed Clara; she felt as if she were the only person in the room. As if she were back in the hall of mirrors, gazing into the eyes of her equal: herself. “I know you.” Clara whispered. The woman smiled warmly in response, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Break his heart for me.” With these words, the woman rested her head, closed her eyes, and let out a final exhale, leaving Clara alone with the figure at the door.

“No.” Edgar moaned, making his way to the woman. “No, no, no, no, please.” Clara slowly backed away into the wall where she remained for what seemed like hours as Edgar groaned and pleaded and sobbed for his dead wife to return. How many times had he subjected himself to this pain? Finally, the sound was stifled and Edgar turned to Clara, eyes unrecognisable. Before, he had appeared a broken and lost man. Now, he was a desperate, anxious soul crawling toward Clara with eyes of both certainty and utter despair. “Clara. Clara, please.”

“No.” Clara whispered softly.

“No, no, Clara, you have to stay with me.” As Edgar muttered, he reached for Clara’s hands.

“Don’t touch me!” Clara clung to the wall as if it would engulf her, taking her away from this horrid, anything but ordinary night. Edgar’s hands recoiled but his eyes seemed to grow more desperate by the second.

“I won’t! I won’t!” Edgar sobbed. “I just want to be near you. I *have* to be near you. Please, please.”

Clara couldn’t deny her pity, and couldn’t restrain her fear. “I’m not her!” She pleaded. “Your wife is dead.”

“No.”

“Yes, she died years ago.” Clara pointed to the bed with shaking fingers. “That woman wasn’t her. Neither were the other women you came here to collect after she died. And neither am I.”

“Yes you are.” Edgar shook his head violently, trying to drown out Clara’s words.

“Your wife is gone.” Clara whispered.

Edgar looked up with manic eyes. “No. She’s here. You’re here. You are my wife. *My* Clara.”

“I won’t stay with you.”

Edgar looked as if a dagger had pierced him in the soul.

He took a breath and stood, desperation replaced by complete determination. “Then I’ll come back here until you will. I will meet you here again, and again, and again just like that first summer.” He smiled painfully. “Until the day that I die, I will never stop finding you because if there is a centre to the universe, it is in your presence, if there is a meaning to existence, the answer is in your eyes, and if there is one ounce of goodness in the spaces between here and the outer edges of the galaxy, every bit of it lies in you, Clara.” Edgar stumbled away, defeated.

“And that, I will not give up.”

Here it was: *extraordinary*, in all its glory. Clara could stay, and finally live a life worth more than an insect’s. She could live a life hotter than the sun and colder than the arctic. But here sat a man who had experienced that life over and over again, and was utterly broken.

Clara caught sight of a moth dancing at the window, drawn to the light of the rising sun.

That was extraordinary. Each miniscule, perfect bit of everyday, average life. Clara stood slowly, and pulled her shoulders back as she walked toward the door.

“The answer is yes.” Edgar’s words stopped Clara at the door. “Icarus would fly again, because the misery of hitting the ground is nothing compared to the ecstasy of reaching the sun.”

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The air was cold as Clara Dickens entered the house. Outside the wind had been restless as winter’s characteristic stagnancy gave way to an anxious stirring. But here, in the imposing mansion surrounded by forest at the end of Tempus street, the atmosphere was still.