

Rufus Brown

Homage To My Grandfather's Clock

The clock stands like a sentinel against the wall dividing the dining room from the living room in our house, a house built by my brother. The house overlooks Riggs Cove in Georgetown, Maine; beyond is MacMahan Island where I grew up in the summers. In the background I feel the soft, resonating rhythm of the heavy pendulum swinging back and forth— “tick, tock, tick tock” in sync with the beat of my heart.

There are good reasons to resent clocks. They rule our lives, relentlessly. They dictate when we get up in the morning, when we eat, and when we go to sleep. They tell us when to show up for appointments. They measure the days, the weeks, the months, and the years of our lives. They pay no heed to how time has passed, whether joyfully or wretchedly; they care not.

Yet a grandfather clock is somehow different. Take the origin of its name. It can be traced to the song, “My Grandfather’s Clock,” written in 1876 by the American Clay Work that went viral, to use today’s expression. The song narrates a tale of a man in North Yorkshire England who on his birthday receives a longcase clock that becomes his treasure and pride, sharing both his grief and his joy. One verse reads:

My grandfather said that of those he could hire, Not a servant so faithful he found;

For it wasted no time, and had but one desire – At the close of each week to be wound. And it kept in its place – not a frown upon its face, And the hands never hung by its side; But it stoppd’d short – never to go again – When the old man died.

A loyal companion to a grandfather. My grandfather’s clock served that role when it sat in the center hall of my Grandfather Rodney Brown’s federal house in Andover, Massachusetts. When I was just fourteen in the late 1950’s, I boarded with him while attending summer school at Phillips Andover to prepare me, I was told, for enrollment the next Fall as a “junior.” Apparently, there was some doubt about the likelihood of my success at this esteemed institution without this summer of preparation. I can still recall that rhythm breaking the silence, like a metronome, reminding me, even back then, that time marches on and I had better march too, and at a steady, even pace. That summer I got to know both my grandfather’s clock and my grandfather, who previously had been a remote presence in my life. My grandfather was a man who quietly dwelled within himself in solitude, aroused occasionally, like when a groundhog caught his attention, causing him to leap from his chair, grab a shot gun, and blast away in the backyard before calmly returning to his leather chair to recapture the serenity of the nearby, faithful clock. My grandfather would not abide those varmints ruining his “million-dollar backyard”. I took him literally, when he explained this, feeling a new sense of luxury after that as I labored through Dickens under the pines that framed his backyard. My grandfather passed away just months after that summer.

The clock passed down to my parents. Sadly, its active life was tragically cut short not long thereafter by a fire at Pease House, my parents’ faculty residence at Phillips Andover. It was just as well as the clock struggled at Andover. It was

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forced to compete with that mighty Andover Belltower looming 159 feet high, directly across the street from Pease House, blasting out four notes on the quarter hour and the full Westminster Chimes on the hour. Admittedly, that belltower is a magnificent structure, granite at the base, then brick for about 100 feet, with arched windows on the face of each wall near the top over the clock dial, and then above that a wooden steeple in two decks. There is a platform for playing the chimes. Heavy wooden mallets were used to play Episcopal hymns. The belltower was built in 1923 as a memorial to eighty-seven Phillips Academy men who had died in World War I. My grandfather's clock, alas, didn't even have chimes, but might have boasted of its older heritage. The mighty Andover Belltower would have countered, *yes even if that is true, I stand on a square used as a training ground to drill men during the Revolutionary War*. No response would come from my grandfather's clock to that because, as I just explained, it had been reduced to a nonfunctioning set of works.

That could have been the end of the clock's story. My father, despite his many admirable qualities, was at heart an unsentimental consumer. When something wore out and was about to break, it was always someone else who did the breaking. Then, after judgment was assessed, he either ignored the broken object or just threw it out. Over fifty years ago, he bought a graceful 23-foot sloop with varnished mahogany brightwork. When the brightwork faded, he covered it with gray house paint and, when the sailboat needed structural restoration, he pronounced his intention to drive a stake through it and sink in the nearby Sheepscot Bay, that is, unless I took it off his hands, his way of passing on a legacy.

As luck would have it, although the clock case burned in the fire, the clock works survived. My father, true to his nature, stored them in the back of a closet in Andover. The box remained there for ten years and then traveled to Bath, Maine to his retirement home, where the works continued to be confined in the back of another closet for another twenty-five years without so much as a peep, or should I say, a tick. My mother passed and the works remained there for still another eight years until my father passed. My brother, who built my house, reportedly considered making a case for the works, but apparently felt it was too complicated or troublesome an undertaking.

Finally, the works were liberated from the closet. As the personal representative of my father's estate, in the process of distributing its assets among my siblings, I chose the box. The estate appraiser had dismissed the clock as just a modern reproduction without any particular value. Jason, my son, would have none of that and I embraced his view.

After discharging my solemn duties, I transported the box home. That too could have been it if I followed in my father's footsteps. Out of curiosity I opened it. Inside, on top, was an envelope. "Open me" it beckoned. I did and found an aged envelope with handwritten notes from the "The ClockFolk of New England" located in Wilmington, Massachusetts. The notes gave detailed measurements and instructions for how to build a case for the works and how to regulate them. I unwrapped parts of the works embedded in yellowing pages of the *Boston Globe* with the eagerness of a child on Christmas morning. Each wrapping yielded a stunning surprise: A clock face made of shiny brass with a painted moon phase in the arch. The moon was pale, with rouge cheeks, an outline of a nose, dark eyes with arched eyebrows and puckered, red, lips. The chapter ring was marked in both Roman numbers and Arabic. The corner spandrels were gilded brass. The weights were solid, heavy cylinders also made of brass, attached

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to brass cables and brass pullies, and finally there was a brass disc at the base of the long wooden pendulum. Although impressed by its grandeur, the expense and complications of following these instructions were daunting. So, I closed the box with a sigh of resignation. The box migrated from the closet up to our attic, accessible only from an outside ladder, and there it resumed its imprisonment for another ten years. And that too could have been the end of my acquaintance with the relic.

So why did I risk life and limb to liberate the works once again after almost 60 years of confinement? Maybe it was the need for connection after all the quarantining in the Pandemic. No, there was something more at play. It weighed on me. The thought of it became a burden. It deserved a better fate. It had a connection to our family that needed to be honored. Sort of like the role that the belltower serves for Phillips Academy. What had started as curiosity morphed into a mission to retrieve that box and to restore that timepiece to its former glory. How hard could that really be? The works were all shiny and must have been carefully restored by The ClockFolk.

That was key, so I thought at the time. The ClockFolk connection. I say that because I tracked down their website which proclaimed that they were “Certified Master Clockmakers”, certified, that is, by none other than the American Watchmakers and Clockmakers Institute at Cincinnati, Ohio (known to those of you who follow these things as “AWCT”), the premier organization dedicated to the horology industry, publisher of the award-winning *Horological Times*. Further research revealed that this certification comes only to those with a passion together with an extraordinary level of knowledge, patience, and skill. The owners of The ClockFolk explained that they were in this esteemed class, having undertaken five years, that’s right, *five years* of intense horological study at the historic Bowman Technical School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Who knew? One does wonder in this digital world about the professional growth opportunities for those reaching this level of professional recognition. But it seems the ClockFolk aren’t worried about that in the least. In fact, they caution anyone inquiring that they are not willing to repair or restore just any clock. No, they say, “our company, in most cases, will [only] undertake the repair of clocks that are worthy of the time and effort necessary to service them correctly and completely” after “inspecting the clock in question” and then, only if “we feel we can repair it to work as intended by the original maker”. My clock must have passed this rigorous screening, it must have been deemed worthy of repair, so I thought.

Excited by this, I called The ClockFolk to get background on the clock and to find out where to get a cabinet made. From a picture I sent they speculated, based on the hand painted moon phase as a distinguishing feature, that it was made by the Elliot Clock Company of London in the 1890s. Jason rejected this opinion, believing the clock was of older vintage, from George Wills.

Ok, so I need to tell you about this guy. George Wills is a relative who sailed in clipper ships out of Newburyport, Massachusetts trading with Calcutta in the mid-1800s, brother of my namesake, Rufus Wills. This resonated because I did inherit this distant relative’s sea chest with his ship logbooks and prayer book after choosing the clock. On inspection, I discovered his ship logs were “kept by” George Wills but on ships whose “Master and Commander” was someone else. It was George’s father, Captain John Wills, Jr., born in 1784, who was the big deal, owner of the ships George sailed on. John owned over ten ships during the days of the

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Calcutta East India and the West Indies trade. He was the founder of two banks in Newburyport and a woolen mill in Salisbury, Massachusetts. According to an informal biography, Captain John Wills was “acknowledged throughout the country as [producing] the best [fabrics] ... this side of the Atlantic.” Not only that, but Captain Wills commanded a privateer during the War of 1812, was captured and imprisoned in England, and then exchanged back to Newburyport. George could hardly live up to that. Who could? But George did work in the family business and fathered one child, Helen (“Nellie”) Wills, born in Calcutta, West Bengal, India, who married Henry Albert Brown, producing one child, you guessed it, none other than my Grandfather Rodney. As far as Jason was concerned, it was settled; the clock probably was not from the 1700’s yet just as probably came from the time that George graced this earth. And I accept that; I like that.

But when I asked The ClockFolk about getting a cabinet made, I was told, “Don’t think you can just make one for \$1-2,000. No, no, you’re looking at least \$10-15,000.” I was given the name of someone in Vermont who could do the job but with another warning: “He is very picky.” If that’s what The ClockFolk thought, I could only imagine. I guessed that meant he was also more expensive than \$15,000. So much for bringing the clock back for a second act.

Later, perchance, at the tail end of the Pandemic, I learned from a clerk in a Clock Shop in Portland that they worked with a lady in Gorham who specialized in antique clocks. Fine, I lamented, but I can’t afford a case. The clerk beckoned me closer and confided in a low voice that he knew a guy in Alfred who might do the job. Do the job? Like a hit job? I asked in jest. No, nothing like that, he chuckled, he has a website.

I promptly drove down to Alfred with my box. I found his house at the foot of a driveway that dipped down at such a steep angle that I felt like I was going down a rabbit hole. The Woodworking Guy was out front waiting for me. I shook hands with a man, I would guess in his 60’s, with longish grey hair cut in the style of the 70’s. He was tall, looked to be in good health and friendly, with an upbeat air about him. I was a stranger in his house, but he made me feel completely at ease, eager to please, almost as if he were my valet. He had a smile as broad as a Cheshire Cat, but his overall appearance made me think of a duck.

“I built this house myself”, he explained with pride as he showed me around inside. The open living room seemed to take up almost all of the first floor under a cathedral ceiling with balusters on the second floor behind which I heard a greeting from the guy’s wife who worked from home. The huge room was dominated by a giant pool table. In front of the pool table was a glassed-in case housing an extensive collection of model cars. What’s with that? I thought. As I looked around more I saw pieces of furniture he had made, some kitschy, some looking like genuine antiques, including a grandfather clock. What I did not know at the time was that farther down this rabbit hole, under the entire house, was a cavernous below-grade shop filled with drills, saws, lathes, and all kind of wood. While showing this to me later, he confided that his wife earned most of the money they lived on. I resisted the urge to tell him that his customers would pay twice the price he charged given the quality of his work. Was that wrong of me? I mean, what a find, what a treasure. I sensed this even before I saw what he ended up building me.

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First, we needed to settle on a design. Jason insisted that the case should reflect its period, meaning a large “bonnet” and then a narrower “waist section” and a base, allowing that the waist could be glassed to show the weights and pendulum even though the period waist usually was closed in. I went with that except I didn’t want a clock that was over seven feet tall, the traditional size of a “longcase clock.” I wanted to look “at” the clock, not “up at” it. He agreed.

A few months later the Woodworker Guy called to say the case was ready. It was February with fresh snow on the ground. I rented a U-Haul van to transport my newly minted case. He greeted me again with a confident smile, which by then I decided was a permanent feature of his face, and showed me what he had built. Looking at the case brought on a surge of joy and pride. The case was made of cherry. The top of the bonnet was flat over a half- moon arch. He made fluted columns on each side of the bonnet. The face of the clock was covered by a framed glass door, arched at the top to mimic the arch in the top of the bonnet and the painted lunar moon phase of the clock face, inset from the side columns. Below the bonnet was a cornice and below that a narrower waist, also with a glass door to show the weights and pendulum with side fluted columns, and last of all a beveled base.

The only downside, I was told, was that the clock did not keep time, a rather disturbing piece of news. I mean, what good is a clock that doesn’t keep time? That didn’t seem to bother the Woodworker Guy, who actually had a grandfather clock that did not keep time. “Not to worry”, he said, “it probably just needs oil.” Then he told me, to my further dismay, that the case needed to be disassembled to transport. This was no simple task. The contraption resembled a Rubik’s Cube. The Woodworker Guy took his power drill and began breaking down the case into five different elaborately engineered pieces. I took a video of this process concealing the fear that I might never be able to reverse this process in the future. I started having second doubts.

I brought the disassembled case home, and with faith that had little foundation delivered the works to the Clock Shop. Weeks later I received a call from the Clock Lady. With a sigh of a heavy heart, she informed me that the works needed a lot more than just oil. She started reciting items that needed to be repaired or replaced. It was not short. Bushings needed to be replaced, pivots needed to be polished, the clock needed a new cable, the rack tail was damaged and needed to be repaired or replaced, the strike lifting wheel pins were cutting into the clock plate, the gathering pulley was loose, the hammer spring was rusty, the lubrication was reacting to the brass, the pulleys were worn and needed new axels, she would need to make seated screw nuts, repair the suspension block, reposition the lunar calendar pick, repair plier damage to GW pivots, solder the washer leads I tuned out before she could finish. She paused and then said she was disappointed; she thought the works had been restored.

Disappointed? Why would *she* be disappointed? *I* was the one who had commissioned a case for a clock that likely should be tossed out. I held my breath waiting for the proclamation that the poor old clock was beyond repair. But wait, no, it turns out that she actually could fix all these issues and bring the works to Georgetown and install the works in my

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case, of course at a cost that was not modest. Giddy with the excitement of a goal within reach, I instantly agreed.

Three months later I received a call from the Clock Lady saying she was ready for the "installation". In preparation, I carefully reviewed my video of how to reassemble the clock case, trying it out as Air Play from my iPhone on my forty-two-inch TV, collected all the different screw drivers she might need and charged the battery on my power drill, excited but slightly nervous.

On the appointed day, the Clock Lady's transit vehicle labored up the hill to our house. She exited her van and, after a perfunctory greeting, wearing surgical gloves, immediately started to unpack the clockworks and her equipment. She was short, in her mid- sixties, wiry, with intense eyes. In counterpoint to the duck-like Woodworker Guy, the Clock Lady had the aggressive look of a racoon and soon revealed a demeanor of the Queen of Hearts. Between the two of them, I experienced a kind of relational whiplash. (*Google* suggests that a remedy for this condition is to consider talking with a professional.) First out of the van was the clock pendulum. "This is how you transport a pendulum," she said showing me a board with supports for the pendulum base and for the neck. "You should take a picture of this." Then she muscled out the large, heavy box with the clockworks. I offered my assistance but held back as her body language was telling me that no help was needed or welcome.

It was a gorgeous spring day. From my house you couldn't help but admire the bright green of the newly opened leaves and the deep blue of the waters in Riggs Cove, but she could. The Clock Lady showed no interest. "Show me the clock case" she said without further ado.

I took her to the five pieces, explaining that I had a video. She never looked at the video. She looked at the clock case, paused, and eventually uttered, "nice." That was the last positive remark she made about the case or anything else. Later she explained that there is a natural conflict between casemakers and clock experts, with an edge in her voice that left no doubt as to the outcome of the conflict if it involved her. This thought apparently inspired her to share her qualifications. She was a "master antique clock restorer." I refrained from asking whether she was certified by AWCT, afraid of what might happen if she thought I was questioning her credentials with my newly acquired insider knowledge. She had apprenticed under a clock restorer who did "museum quality" work. No one in Maine had this professional level of training, she informed me. She was in the process of passing on her trade to one of the employees at the Clock Shop who eventually could take over. She herself was not an employee, suggesting that this status would be beneath someone with her level of expertise. She had her own business and worked as a contractor for the Clock Shop. When I commented that her work seemed complicated, she eagerly agreed. Her father had been a nuclear engineer, had patented several inventions, designed, and built a 25- foot sailboat, and made a motorcycle out of a bicycle with a motor from a lawnmower, among other accomplishments. She implied that these impressive talents had been passed on to her. Apparently the horologist profession attracts certain personality types.

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The Clock Lady started to put the pieces of the case together without the clockworks to “get a feel for how this works.” When she finished this warmup, she looked at the case and remarked, “it’s too short.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The clock is powered by the drop of the brass weights on the chains to the floor of the case,” she explained. “You rewind the clock, pulling the weights back up to the top of the waist every eight days. Didn’t the Woodworker Guy read the instructions to have the ‘drop 43’ with ‘plenty of excess.’ There is no ‘excess’ here” she said with disgust. “So, the chain you have is too long now. And look, under the bonnet, he built in ridges blocking the weights from being fully raised.” This did not sound good.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“I will have to shorten the chain and you will have to rewind every five days.”

“Ok,” I said. That didn’t sound too bad.

“Wait a minute,” she said next. “The bonnet doesn’t fit on top of the waist properly. Look at this; it is off kilter by 40°! This is a big problem.”

I had another surge of panic. I looked at the bonnet askew on top of the trunk of the case and said to her, “this is not right. I’ll call the Woodworker Guy.”

By the time I had the Woodworker Guy on the phone and began to explain that the Clock Lady was here and had a problem, she interrupted, saying, “never mind, I figured this out.”

“Ok, now that I have worked with this case, I will put the works in.” This seemed reassuring. She opened her black case filled with screwdrivers, drills and chains with other parts and pieces I could not identify. She looked like a surgeon about to start operating. As she proceeded, she continued her commentary on the case. The back of the case should be fastened with wing nuts, not screwed in. Support for the clock face should be in front of the face, not behind. I stopped responding, now gaining a deeper understanding of the natural conflict with cabinet makers, and just looked on as she worked on with running commentary.

Before reattaching the back of the case, she showed me the inner works of the clock and said, “this is where you put your oil in,” pointing vaguely to some tiny parts. I pointed my finger near one of the parts she had singled out.

“DON’T TOUCH THAT !” she exclaimed, “the oil on your finger will damage the parts.” Then she explained, “You need a special oil. This is what I use.” She showed me a small capsule labeled *Moebius 9014 Synta-Visco Watch Oil*. “It costs over \$30 for 2 milliliters.” I was quite sure I would not be buying this oil and would not be trying to oil the works. “Yes, I can do maintenance every two years,” she assured me.

Finally, after spending four hours on this job, she took out a level and inserted shims under the clock, mumbling about how this had taken much longer than she had estimated but she would not charge me more. Unfortunately, her day now had to be rearranged.

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As she was ready to go, she said, "don't let the weights go down so much that the pulleys are resting on the floor of the case. If that happens you will need to put pressure on the chain when you rewind to prevent it from coming off the grove in the works."

"How do I do that?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, I have to go. Look at a video," she said over her shoulder as she hastily exited my house.

"What video?" I said to the space she no longer occupied.

I sat back to contemplate this new object inhabiting my house. There seemed to be endless possibilities for damage to what seemed like a fragile museum piece. On the other hand, the solid, stocky clock had gravitas. It asserted a presence larger than its size. The soft, rhythmic tick-tock-tick-tock left a background silence of stillness and serenity, interrupted periodically by a whirring and a muted hour strike. I was transported first to my Grandfather Rodney's house and then further back to a Victorian library with oak paneling, while the clock's mysterious history connected me with past generations and ones to follow. Its hourly strikes remind me of how precious time has become, all the more so after recently undergoing surgery not unlike that which was performed on my clock. No longer my grandfather's clock; *my* clock at least for now. Not a servant more faithful have I found.