

# MELTING CLOCKS

I looked at the clock and saw it melting. I shook my head, closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again. There it was, hanging on the wall, most definitely not melting. But stuck at 12. That night is tattooed in my memory in vivid blood-red ink.

It must have been around midnight on Friday because I looked outside the window of my office atop that monstrous tower, saw the Statue of Liberty trying to set fire to Staten Island, and the only thought I could muster was “what the fuck am I doing here?” I had to finish the charade of pretending to read through 10,000 documents before I could leave. They call it “due diligence.” I call it a \$500 dollar hand-washing. Seven years of school at some of the most prestigious institutions in the world and I was a cheap imitation of Pilate, albeit in a fancy suit with an office overlooking the New York Harbor. Welcome the housing staff of the 1% old chap – get a taste for it so you can keep chasing it, but it will never be yours. The ultimate trap. I felt a marching band pounding in my head, the computer screen was a blur, and the utter dissatisfaction dripping from my pores completely overpowered my sense of responsibility. Fuck it. I locked my computer, got up from my black ultra-ergonomic-let’s-make-sure-these-drones-can-sit-at-their-desks-as-long-as-humanly-possible chair, put my navy blue winter jacket on, turned the light off and walked toward the elevators. 49 floors. That takes a lot longer and a lot shorter than one might expect.

As the elevator raced down beeping at every floor, I felt an intense hammering as though my heart were hanging paintings on the inside of my chest wall. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and began buttoning the useless but decorative buttons on my jacket. I couldn’t help but ask myself why on earth I was buttoning up a jacket that was already zipped up. The insanity of this gesture made my attempt to relax a classic exercise in futility. I finally reached the deserted lobby and put my beanie on as I moved toward the revolving doors that led to the plaza. The building was a landmark in the financial district surrounded by a large elevated plaza with benches and a gigantic sculpture. It was freezing outside and there were patches of ice on the streets and sidewalks courtesy of a spell of freezing rain the previous evening. The polar vortex was visiting for the third time that winter and parts of the Hudson were frozen. I felt the water in my eyes crystalize as soon as I stepped outside.

I turned right and walked west on the plaza toward Broadway. The streets were as empty as a bum’s whisky bottle at the end of good day’s work. Those who were out were already getting drunk at some bar in some other neighborhood. I walked down Cedar Street along

Zucotti Park and felt the wind burning my face. Left, right, left, right, left, right, don't slip. The cold was biting my bones and for some reason I thought of her. Maybe it was the cruel cold. As her sad eyes looked at me and I remembered how much I missed her, hot acid began boiling in my veins. Why had I let her do this to me? I kept walking and instead of turning right on Albany toward home, I went straight on Greenwich toward the subway. I am not sure I even debated it in my mind as I usually did when deciding whether or not to go somewhere. I don't recall weighing pros and cons. I didn't ask myself whether the possibility of something fun happening outweighed the comfort of lying on my rug and watching TV. I didn't consider whether I wanted to deal with the hassle of taking the subway. I didn't text my friends to see if they were out. I was on auto-pilot. I told myself that I needed a drink, which I could have gotten at the Irish pub in front of the World Trade Center memorial, or at the Black Hound on South End. But my legs took me toward the subway. As I approached Rector Street, the scaffolding around one of the eternal construction sites in the financial district forced me to walk through a column of steam spewing from the nostrils of hell. I felt disgusting, stopped for a second, and spat on the sidewalk in a futile attempt to cleanse myself. I walked down the stairs to the station, swiped my card and read on the overhead screen that the train would arrive in six minutes. I stood on the platform looking at the rats as they played with the trash on the rails. Rats playing with trash.

The train arrived, stabbing me as it screeched to a halt. I boarded through the center doors and leaned against the doors on the opposite side of the car. It took me a couple of minutes to notice the rancid smell of the homeless man sleeping on one of the benches. The two of us were alone. I waited for the next stop and switched cars. As I stepped onto the train again, I caught a glimpse of a blonde sitting on the other end of the car and the thought of her caught up with me again. I remembered her golden-blond hair, her glacier-blue eyes, her long legs, and I felt betrayed. It had been three years at that point since the last time I had spoken to her. Three years of running in circles looking for her in everyone. Three years of chasing a memory like a retarded dog chases its tail. Three years of failing without disappointment. Three years of returning without failure to my default setting. It's just easier that way. And it was even easier because I didn't have to see her. She was half way around the world in her winter wonderland playing house with her country boy in a big city of 100,000. It was easy because she only existed in my mind, so I could bring her back whenever I wanted.

I had not decided where I was going but when the train stopped at Christopher Street, I got off. I walked out on the east side of Seventh Avenue. I crossed the street without looking out for oncoming traffic and almost got chopped in half by a cab that swerved around me as the driver murdered me with the horn before he got out of his car to curse at me more comfortably. My heart was racing but I ignored and scurried west on Christopher. Left, right, left, right, don't slip. I could feel a horse galloping inside my chest. I stepped into the first watering hole I saw. The heavy electronic music attacked me as soon as I set foot inside. Thump, thump, thump. It was deafening. The bass was so loud the floor was shaking. Boom, boom, boom. I pushed my way to the bar and I could hear the faceless creatures yelling at each other in failed attempts to

overpower the music with their puny lungs and putrid fermented breaths. The place was more crowded than the gates of hell. I ordered a beer and as the bartender started to ask which kind, he must have immediately seen it in my eyes that it didn't matter because he dug into the well, grabbed the first bottle he could find and gave it to me. "It's on the house." "Thanks." I miraculously found a stool and sat down as I chugged half the bottle. The alcohol had a soothing effect. But it didn't last long. Boom, boom, boom. Thump, thump, thump. Generation Y's computer-generated nauseating excuse for music was beating on my skull like the war drums of the Third Reich. The ringing in my ears pierced through my brain. I could have burnt every so-called DJ on the planet alive.

I finished my beer and asked for another. The bartender opened the bottle and I fixated for two seconds on the vapor that abandoned the bottle as the cap came off. I downed half the bottle in one gulp. I raised my head and looked toward the door, which was about 25 feet away, and I saw a blonde in a black and white polka-dotted skirt, black tights, ankle-high black leather boots and a pink peacoat. Or maybe she wasn't wearing any of that. Maybe as soon as I saw the blonde hair and the polka-dotted skirt my brain filled in the rest. She loved polka dots. I am not even sure I could have seen her legs, let alone her feet, from where I was sitting. There were too many people standing between me and the door. I remember desperately trying to see her face as she moved through the crowd. I noticed that she was holding a guy's hand as she made her way through the herd of drunken cattle, but I still couldn't see her well. I felt the rage festering in the pit of my stomach. My fists clenched, my jaw locked, my eyes trying frantically to get a better look. I chugged what was left of my beer and wiped my mouth violently with the back of my hand. I signaled to the bartender for another one. I'm not sure why he was paying attention to me when he had 30 or 40 people swarming around the bar imploring for a drink. He handed me the bottle and gave me a worried look as he saw me drain it before he had a chance to set it on the bar. I nodded for another and he reluctantly obliged. Could it be her? It couldn't be. She lives in bumblefuck Scandinavia. Why would she come to New York in the winter? Wouldn't she want to go somewhere warm to escape the cold in her miserable town? Would she dare come to New York knowing that I live here? Aren't there enough cities in Europe to go visit? Does she even know that I live in New York? She must.

It had been three years since I told her to pretend I was dead. And she did; very successfully. Minus the mourning because who needs that. It took me too long to realize that she was drifting away, and when she first expressed some doubts about our future, my pride blinded me and I didn't fight. There is a moment in every man's life that I like to call emotional flatlining. The woman we love tells us that she is not sure she wants to be with us. But what she is really telling us is that she wants us to fight for her. We hear whatever she is saying and take it literally because we are imbeciles. She is saying "please fight and show me you love me" and we hear "it's over." So naturally, what do we do? We switch to rational mode and flatline. Code blue. But no one is rushing with the paddles because *we* are holding the paddles. We tell ourselves that it's not worth fighting for someone who doesn't want to be with us and we agree

with whatever half-assed reason she is giving us for wanting to end things. She says please try and we say no thanks. Game over. It's that very cowardice and unwillingness to fight that leads her to finally disengage. The plug is pulled and there is no going back. There is a single moment in every relationship when she disconnects. Many things lead to that instant and many others transpire after it, but it's the breaking point. The situation may drag on for a while longer, but she is already gone.

I remember that moment all too clearly. She threw a lifeline and I said no thanks, I'll swim. But the water was choppy and when I realized I couldn't brave it alone, she had already floated away. She still loved me but set out to prove to herself that she could live without me. And she did. She won. When I came back to beg, it was too late. Every single day after that one moment was a waste. I fought like a dog fights his image in the mirror. There was no turning back. It's not that she didn't love me; it's that she didn't want to love me. And that is death.

As I followed her with my eyes, she got lost in the crowd. Without leaving my bar stool, I scavenged the place searching for her. Was it her? It couldn't possibly be. But it could. She always liked New York and she might have decided to take a trip with her piece of shit boyfriend. I had never met the guy but I hated him. I think that's reasonable. He was the scumbag who had stolen her from me. Well, not exactly. Or maybe. I have no idea how it happened. I don't know if she had already decided that she liked him when we stopped talking. She certainly knew him. Regardless, the thought of her with him turned me into a rabies-infected wolf ready to dig my fangs into his flesh and watch him suffer.

I couldn't decide whether to get up or not. I took a gulp. What if it was her? What would I say to her? Hi, how are you? Fuck you, thanks for giving up on us and ruining my life? Sorry for not reading the signs when I still could have saved us? I hate you and why would you be so cruel as to come to my city with another asshole? What if I froze? What would I say to him when she introduced us? Fuck you, thanks for stealing my life? Go back to your miserable town and your pathetic mediocre excuse for an existence? Who the fuck do you think you are coming to my prison to flaunt the spoils of your victory? She only picked you because you were physically present and I wasn't? You can't hold a candle to me you ignorant government-fed sperm residue? Take that naïve I-still-believe-in-Santa-Clause smile and bite the sidewalk as I drive my heel into your skull? I probably wouldn't say any of that. I played the scene in my head over and over and I couldn't make myself get up. I was petrified.

It was in May that she first told me that she had been having doubts about our relationship. I was flying the next day to see her and I didn't get on the plane. The signs were there. She had become more distant. She didn't want to Skype every day like we once had. She was busier. She didn't seem overjoyed at the thought of my going to visit her. But I played dumb. I figured whatever it was we could fix it when we saw each other. And yet, when she came out and told me point blank that she was rethinking things, I told her it was not worth it and

I didn't get on that plane. How could she tell me these things the day before I was supposed to go see her? Why couldn't she have waited? Fucking pride. I was asking the wrong questions and that's when I lost her. Two weeks later I realized I couldn't live without her and I wanted her back but at that point I was nothing more than a beggar. She had realized that she could live without me and that it wasn't as painful as she had imagined. She told me that. Her honesty bordered on cruelty. I did everything I could to win her back and finally convinced her to come to the States in August. But, in the end, everything that happened between May and January that year was a waste of life and is not even worth mentioning. I did everything I could to salvage whatever was left until she told me to stop. And then I tried one more time until I realized that she was no longer even conflicted by her decision to move on. That instant hit me like lightning strike. I had become the annoying ex-boyfriend and it was time to call it quits. I told her to pretend I was dead. And she was so good at pretending that she might as well have killed me. Within 4 months I found out from my moronic friend that she had a new boyfriend. He thought telling me would help me get over her. It only made me hate her and my replacement.

I finally mustered the balls to get up and look for her. I grabbed my bottle and left forty dollars on the bar. I stood up and almost lost my balance. The bass sent electric shocks through my feet. I stumbled into the mob of intoxicated yuppies trying to get laid. The noise was unbearable and my head felt like I had just gotten hit full-force on my temple with the edge of a frying pan. After elbowing my way through a few thousand pounds of flesh I managed to get to the back of the bar and I saw her. She was sitting at a table facing the back wall. I still couldn't see her face. Fuck. With every step I took toward her, the thumping bass pumped venom into my bloodstream. I could feel the rage rising from my feet to my head. My eyes focused only on her and everything else was a haze. Love, hate, Regret, poison, left, right, left, right, boom, boom, boom, thump, thump, thump. In an attempt to awaken myself, I bit my lip so hard that I started to bleed. But instead, the taste of blood in my mouth drove me forward. Tears started flowing from my eyes and I stopped, downed the beer and the blood in my mouth in one gulp, and grabbed the bottle by the neck with my right hand. I started moving again toward my torment like the wounded enraged bull charges the bullfighter, but in slow motion. When I finally reached her, I turned my head away from the table and spat out the blood that had started gushing from my inner-lip again. I turned to look at her, and as I reached to tap her shoulder, time stopped. Tick, tock, tick, tock-----

A strand of her golden-blond hair rested on the back of my hand, gently tickling my skin, cruelly reminding me of what I would never have again.