

Amy Whittington

The Clockmaker's Wife

The clicking and winding of gears can be heard from all around. It grows louder until it is almost unbearable.

The sound stops, replaced by the ticking of two clocks, slightly out of time, so that they resemble the beating of a heart.

The lights come up on the CLOCKMAKER's workshop. Every wall is covered in clocks; none of them appear to be working.

Every surface is covered in ancient clockwork toys, half-built and long neglected.

The CLOCKMAKER himself is a small, bald man of about 60 who squints behind his glasses. He is blind to almost everything that is not right in front of his nose. He sits bent far over a worktable centre-stage and works minutely on his project.

On the table is something that resembles a brass skeleton of human size. She is partially clad in gleaming plates. Where she is unclad, in her chest and stomach, her mechanical entrails are visible.

At length, the CLOCKMAKER's son CHARLIE enters. He is a mild young man approaching 30. He also wears glasses.

He spots his father and looks fondly if sadly at his back. He starts to say something, but doesn't. He crosses to a shelf and picks up a plateless pocketwatch.

CLOCKMAKER What's missing?

CHARLIE Escape wheel.

The CLOCKMAKER grunts in satisfaction.

Should I fix it?

CLOCKMAKER It's not broken.

CHARLIE It's not?

CLOCKMAKER I needed it.

Good size. Nobody makes that size anymore.

Charlie looks at the watch for a moment, then checks to make sure his father's back is turned before pocketing it.

CHARLIE I had a... a bent balance wheel come in this morning. Funny, it must have been like that for years but the poor lady hadn't noticed. It took me a while to spot it, you would have seen it right away, but it was very slight. Very slight. I imagine she dropped it some years ago, or maybe had it serviced by some roadside mountebank, because for years, she said, she's been turning up later and later to church with no idea why.

Papa, I have news.

Papa, will you look at me? It's important and I'd rather not say it to the back of your head. I imagine it'll come as something of a surprise. Please don't

think I was hiding it from you, just being cautious. Waiting for the right time. I thought you might approve of that. I wanted things to be certain, absolutely certain before I brought you the news. Will you turn around?

CLOCKMAKER The only obvious solution.

CHARLIE Sorry?

CLOCKMAKER Bent balance wheel. Lost time. The only obvious solution.

CHARLIE Papa...

CLOCKMAKER Put the watch back.

CHARLIE obediently takes the watch from his pocket and goes to place it back on the shelf. He stops, looks at the back of his father's head and puts the watch back in his pocket.

CHARLIE How is... it going?

CHARLIE steps closer to the table where the CLOCKMAKER's project lies. He is repulsed by it.

CLOCKMAKER The movement in the hand is catching. The parts age as fast as I can replace them. And now they are no longer making the wheels I need.

CHARLIE I see.

CLOCKMAKER If you would help me, I could keep up with the degeneration of the parts long enough to replace the wheels.

CHARLIE Replacing the wheels would render most of this heart mechanism obsolete.

CLOCKMAKER We replace and replace.

CHARLIE Until the plates corrode and need recasting. Or another spring snaps, One of thousands, which must be located and replaced. By which time the standard size of wheels may well have changed again.

CLOCKMAKER You don't care. You have said you won't help me. Why do I ask?

CHARLIE Wheels might have become obsolete altogether by the time you've done all that.

CLOCKMAKER If you were to help me again...

CHARLIE Then who would mind the shop? Who would be left to mend bent balance wheels? You don't go out front at all anymore. People have stopped asking after you. They must think you're...

Papa. I'm getting married.

She came in with a crooked pinion and I fixed it. The next day she came back and she brought croissants. We shared them on the counter, I thought if you caught me eating at the counter there'd be trouble. This was years ago. It took years.

She's not young. She's... sad. I know she was married before.

Papa, will you turn around? Her name's Clara, she sells pastries. Papa, will you..? I wanted to tell you because... Look at me. Because I'm going to live with her and I want... we want you to... we could look after you but the shop would have to... do you understand?

I can't leave you here on your own.

Papa, look at me.

Look at me

LOOK AT ME!

CHARLIE takes his father's shoulder, and then immediately lets go as though shocked by electricity. By his own boldness. He cradles his hand

The CLOCKMAKER slowly turns, raises his head and squints in his son's direction.

CLOCKMAKER And what would you have me do with your mother?

Beat

CHARLIE Please don't call it that.

CLOCKMAKER I do not need looking after. I am looking after her.

CHARLIE Papa, you can't run the shop on your own, and I can't start my married life with Clara like this. Not here with... *that*.

CLOCKMAKER She gave you life, doesn't she deserve the same in return?

CHARLIE That is not my mother.

Do you understand? I have to get you out of here. It has to stop. I want to help you.

CLOCKMAKER You used to help me.

CHARLIE I was a child. I believed you. I'd never learned the difference between broken and... and... dead!

You'll like her. She wants to meet you. Please.

Please.

CHARLIE waits as long as he can. His father stares at the floor. Finally CHARLIE goes to leave, but just as he reaches the door, the CLOCKMAKER calls out to him.

CLOCKMAKER Charlie, put it back.

CHARLIE takes the watch from his pocket.

CHARLIE It was mother's. This was the one you made for her when you got married.

CLOCKMAKER Put it back.

CHARLIE And now you're butchering it for parts.

CLOCKMAKER She'll understand.

CHARLIE She'll understand.

That thing will consume everything eventually. It's already got you.

CLOCKMAKER How can you say such a thing?

The CLOCKMAKER tenderly takes his creation's hand.

CHARLIE She's just a movement.

CLOCKMAKER She is movement perfected.

CHARLIE What's the problem then? After 18 years why doesn't she work? Did you forget to wind her?

CLOCKMAKER It's the heart mechanism. It beats but...

CHARLIE It's not beating, it's ticking.

CLOCKMAKER (*Muttering*) The mainspring, the ratchet. The barrel has teeth. The teeth drive the centre wheel.

He holds his hand over her stomach

The wheel-train amplifies the force, the pinions catch, the nerves awaken. The wheels, fourth, fifth, thousands, The keyless-work, setting the mind to the moment she left.

He holds his hand over her face

Escapement with every tick of the balance wheel, that's the rhythm... Just like life. Perfect, accurate. Releasing. Releasing just one tooth by one. The lever pushes the balance wheel, it catches. A million pulses beat in time.

He takes her wrist and holds it up

Oscillating. Balanced. Delicate. Alive.

CHARLIE Papa, please...

CLOCKMAKER Her heart is beating but she won't wake. If the wheels catch.

No.

The wheel Catches. The lever pushes the balance... Each ventricle a mainspring. The mainspring is held by a ratch... a ratchet. By a.

It can't be done.

A heart cannot function on clockwork. I've tried for years. A heart cannot function on clockwork. I've tried a million combinations. I cannot feel my fingers. I cannot see.

Charlie, she won't wake up.

CHARLIE Come with me. We can just leave!

He stays put.

CLOCKMAKER She won't wake up.

The CLOCKMAKER gets off his stool and crosses to the side of the room where he wipes his oily hands on a rag and breaks down crying.

CHARLIE starts to cross to his father, but stops as he passes the creation. He gazes at her.

CHARLIE I remember when I was eleven. When you took me upstairs -I hadn't seen you for days- and you showed me the plans. You said we could rebuild her. I helped you. I thought maybe we were all made of metal inside.

I fix a watch now and all I see are so many glittering entrails. The ticking and winding. It repulses me. Like the grinding of teeth. The cracking of knuckles. I feel the snap of a spring as though it were a tendon. I can't stay here.

He looks again at the watch in his hand and puts it back in his pocket

I wish I could remember what my mother's face looked like. I try to. I close my eyes and all I see is brass. Your mosnster took that, too.

CHARLIE picks up a hammer from the worktable and tests it in his hand. He thinks about it for a long time, and then he raises his arm high.

It has to die.

The dead clocks on the wall start to spring to life. The deafening call of a cuckoo bursts through the small room. Previously stationary machine parts now whirr and click, the ticking drowns everything. The lights flicker.

The CLOCKMAKER launches himself across the room and grabs CHARLIE's arm.

They struggle, Charlie eventually breaks free and smashes the clockwork heart.

The CLOCKMAKER roars, removes the hammer from his son and strikes him savagely across the face, knocking him to the floor.

Silence. The clockwork heart has stopped.

The CLOCKMAKER sinks to his knees and cradles the broken doll, sobbing pitifully. CHARLIE, clutching his face, gets to his feet.

CHARLIE *Papa.*

CLOCKMAKER *It's just the mainspring. The escape wheel here, see, it's in-tact. We can start again. My darling. The*

wheel train can be replaced, my love. I just need more parts.

Appalled, CHARLIE leaves.

I can fix you.

I can fix you.

My love, I can fix you.

Lights down

BIOGRAPHY: Amy Whittington is a graduate of BA English and History at the University of Southampton, and has been writing, directing or acting for the amateur stage since childhood. After temping for canteens, hospitals and offices, Amy decided to re-enter education and came to Norwich to study at UEA.