

The Clock Man's Trouble

by Jack Nelson

A lowing cow cracked open the darkened room like the yawn of a gravid alien. Under the covers, the plaintive moans grew louder until Franz pushed into the cold and found the button on the 'smart' alarm clock. He gathered himself up, put on yesterday's clothes and fixed a pot of coffee. In all the rooms, except the kitchen, clocks of every stripe measured time without meaning -- ticking, clicking, ratcheting up to announce the half, full or quarter hour without any relation to Greenwich Mean Time. Like a city becomes a backdrop to daily living, the clocks too faded into a texture of domesticity. He fixed them -- any of them, most of them anyway. His Father was a clock man in Austria, and here in America he too was a clock man. Customers came from all over looking for that Old World craftsmanship. In truth, they came for Franz' accent with curios and cuckoos and grandfathers and mantle clocks; they liked doing business with a European, and he was grateful for their habitual obeisance. A few even managed to engage him about his days running the luge, but lately few customers cared that he missed an opportunity to represent Austria at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid.

The Austrian Team was on a training trip in the Caribbean the summer before the Games when Franz decided to shortcut a hairpin as they raced bikes down the mountain. The continuation of the road was visible eighty meters below the lazy, looping turn -- an avenue in the jungle shot through with shafts of light warm and green. Chasing the stronger cyclist, Henkel, a jag through the vegetation was his only chance to steal victory. He applied the break and rose up out of the saddle as the underbrush swallowed him whole. The snapping twigs and vines stopped abruptly as the bike shot out from under him -- the front wheel lodged in a sluice of volcanic rock -- and he pitched headlong like a massive shuttlecock beneath the canopy and crashed solidly, decidedly, into a palm tree. The islanders carting him down the hill after the accident nicknamed

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him *Deadman* because he was visibly dead for most of the journey to the port. He came swimming back into consciousness beneath a wild eyed Shaman choking a knot of sparkly hanging balls who mouthed incantations hatched from decapitated chickens and hemp. Then he began to scream in a manner befitting a not so dead man. The indignation faded, but he would now be known as the reckless luger who squandered his chance at Olympic Gold racing his countrymen down a sun-drenched atoll.

Pulling gently on the winding chain of a long case clock, he listened with dissatisfaction as the mainspring spent its energy in a petulant spit. He jerked the chain the other way and gently began to tug it once more to see if it would make the musical ratcheting sound of the spring holding tension. Same thing, “vzzzitthhhh” -- slack tension on the winding chain. He would need to fashion a new compression spring to draw the toggle down on the teeth. Fixable, no doubt, but it would be a custom job. He jotted a note on the work order, and looked across the workbench at an old photo of the man in a red suit flying down the mountain within a half-walled tube of ice. His toes pointed like Balanchine's, his neck craned up in a white, open faced helmet with yellow tinted UVEX goggles shielding his eyes from the ripping wind as the blades under his back licked the ice in the straights and skittered through turns bouncing his head off the living ice walls. It was the position that gave him the greatest pleasure in life: flying down a mountain feet first or with her galloping away on top of him. 'A ride on a luger is the ride of your life' he was fond of saying; and, with it came the big Austrian's wooden smile. It worked for a time; then, they'd get tired of the clocks. Only a very special person could tolerate his vocation as a chronographic engineer — in fact, only a deaf woman could.

He made inquiries with local audiologists looking for a stone-deaf beauty who would be the concubine of the Austrian clock man. Their business cards were in the drawer next to the phone, but confidentiality prevented Doctors from matchmaking their patients on his behalf -- another clever but unfortunately dead end in his quest to find one with whom he could share affection without her

being driven insane by the cacophony of time marching on and on. One distraught live-in began snapping the cuckoos off their perches as they burst from tiny barn doors with gaping red maws and eyes bulging for Newton.

Franz trolled the dairy aisle at the grocery store looking for an ersatz milkmaid with an advanced case of tinnitus. It was his habit to make small talk loudly with the hope that she would cup a hand to her ear or better yet fail to respond. The blond with dark roots and a fur-collared jacket considered six different varieties of eggs and jutted her hip out for her hand to rest on while she calculated the increasing level of toxins versus reductions in price. "Have you tried that Greek strained yoghurt!" he boomed. She looked startled, shaken almost — tucking a carton of eggs into the buggy, she scooted away. 'No, no, she would never do,' Franz mused as he eased off toward the check out. 'A yoga mama no doubt, but much too sensitive.'

