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The Girl with a Clock for a Heart

Written by Peter Swanson

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THE GIRL WITH A CLOCK FOR A HEART



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For Charlene

And in loving memory of my grandfather,
Arthur Gladstone Ellis (1916–2012),
the kindest of men and an excellent writer

The Girl with a Clock for a Heart

Prologue

It was dusk, but as he turned onto the rutted driveway he could make out the perimeter of yellow tape that still circled the property.

George parked his Saab, but left the engine running. He tried not to think about the last time he'd been to this almost-hidden house on a dead-end road in New Essex.

The police tape was strung in a wide circle, from pine tree to pine tree, and the front door was plastered with red and white tape in an X pattern. He turned off the engine. The air conditioner stopped blowing, and George almost immediately felt the smothering heat of the day. The sun was low in the sky, and the heavy canopy of pine trees made it seem even darker.

He stepped out of the car. The humid air smelled of the sea, and he could hear gulls in the distance. The dark brown deckhouse blended into the woods that surrounded it. Its tall windows were as dark as its stained siding.

He ducked under the yellow tape that declared POLICE LINE

DO NOT CROSS and made his way toward the back of the house. He was hoping to get in through the sliding-glass doors that opened into the house from the rotted back deck. If they were locked, he would throw a rock through the glass. His plan was to get inside the house and search it as quickly as possible, looking for evidence the police might have missed.

The sliding doors were plastered over with police stickers but were unlocked. He entered the cool house, expecting to be consumed with fear once he was inside. Instead, he felt a surreal sense of calm, as though he were in a waking dream.

I'll know what I'm looking for when I find it.

It was clear that the police had thoroughly searched the property. On several surfaces there were the streaky remains of fingerprint dust. The drug paraphernalia that had been on the coffee table was gone. He turned toward the master bedroom on the east side of the house. It was a room he had never been in, and he opened the door expecting a mess. Instead, he found a fairly neat space, a large, low-ceilinged bedroom with a king-size bed that had been made up with floral sheets. There were two low bureaus opposite the bed, each topped with a plate of glass. Faded Polaroids were pinned under the grimy glass. Birthday parties. Graduations.

He opened the drawers, found nothing. There were some old items of clothing, hairbrushes, perfume bottles still in boxes, all with the dusty, floral smell of mothballs.

A carpeted stairwell led to the lower level. As he passed the landing by the front door he tried hard to keep the images out of his mind. But he looked extra long at the place where the body had fallen, where the skin had turned the color of not skin.

At the bottom of the stairs, he turned left into a large fin-

ished basement, musty-smelling and windowless. He tried the wall switches, but the electricity had been turned off. He pulled the small flashlight he'd brought out of his back pocket and cast its thin, dim light around the basement. In the center of the room was a beautiful vintage billiards table with red felt instead of green, balls scattered randomly across its surface. In the far corner was a high bar area with several stools and a large mirror engraved with the logo of GEORGE DICKEL TENNESSEE WHISKEY. In front of the mirror was a stretch of empty shelf that he imagined had once held an array of liquor bottles, long since emptied and thrown away.

I'll know what I'm looking for when I find it.

He returned upstairs and looked through the smaller bedrooms, both of them, searching for any sign of their most recent occupants, but found nothing. The police would have done the same, would have bagged as evidence anything that struck them as significant, but he had had to come and look for himself. He knew he'd find something. He knew she would have left something.

He found it in the bookshelf of the living room at eye level in a wall of books. It was a white hardcover book, slipcovered in plastic as though it had once belonged to a library, standing out among the other books, most of which were technical. Boating manuals. Travel guides. An ancient set of a child's encyclopedia. There was some fiction on the shelf as well, but it was all mass-market paperbacks. High-tech thrillers. Michael Crichton. Tom Clancy.

He touched the book's spine. The title and the author's name were in a thin, elegant red font. *Rebecca.* By Daphne du Maurier.

It was her favorite book, her one and only favorite book. She

had given him a copy the year they had met. Their freshman year of college. She had read parts of it out loud to him in her dormitory on cold winter nights. He knew passages by heart.

He pulled the book out, ran his finger along the deckled edges of its pages. It fell open at page 6. Two sentences were boxed by carefully drawn lines. He remembered that it was the way she marked books. No highlighter. No underlined passages. Just exact outlines around words and sentences and paragraphs.

George didn't immediately read the marked words; the book had fallen open not by chance but because a postcard had been tucked between its pages. The back of the postcard was slightly yellowed with age. There was nothing written on it. He turned it over and looked at the color image of a Mayan ruin, standing untoppled on a scrubby bluff, the ocean in the background. It was an old postcard, the color of the ocean too blue and the color of the grass too green. He turned it back over. "The Mayan Ruins of Tulum," the description read. "Quintana Roo. Mexico."

Chapter 1

At five minutes past five on a Friday night, George Foss walked directly from his office to Jack Crow's Tavern through the gluey air of a Boston heat wave. He'd spent the final three hours of work meticulously proofreading a rewrite on an illustrator's contract, then staring numbly through his window at the hazy blue of the city sky. He disliked late summer the way other Bostonians disliked the long New England winters. The weary trees, the yellowing parks, and the long humid nights all made him long for the crisp weather of autumn, for breathable air that didn't make his skin stick to his clothes and his bones feel tired.

He walked the half-dozen blocks to Jack Crow's as slowly as he could, hoping to keep his shirt relatively sweat-free. Cars jockeyed along the narrow Back Bay streets attempting to escape the funk of the city. Most residents of this particular neighborhood would be planning their first drinks of the evening at bars in Wellfleet or Edgartown or Kennebunkport, or any of the seaside

towns within reasonable driving distance. George was happy enough to be going to Jack Crow's, where the drinks were average but where the air conditioning, monitored by an ex-pat French Canadian, was routinely kept at meat-locker temperatures.

And he was happy enough to be going to see Irene. It had been over two weeks since he'd seen her last, at a cocktail party thrown by a mutual friend. They had barely spoken, and when George left first she had thrown him a look of mock anger. It made him wonder if their on-again off-again relationship had reached one of its periodic crisis points. George had known Irene for fifteen years, having met her at the magazine where he still worked. She had been an assistant editor while he was in accounts receivable. Being an accountant at a well-known literary magazine had seemed the perfect job for a man with a literary bent but no literary talent. Now George was business manager of that particular sinking ship, while Irene had worked her way up the ranks of the *Globe*'s ever-expanding website division.

They had been a perfect couple for two years. But those two years had been followed by thirteen years of diminishing returns, of recriminations, occasional infidelities, and a constantly lowering set of expectations. And while they'd long since given up the notion that they were an ordinary couple with an ordinary destiny, they still came to their favorite bar, they still told each other everything, they still occasionally slept together, and, against all odds, they'd become best friends. Despite this, there was the periodic need to clarify their status, to have a conversation. George didn't feel he had it in him this particular night. It had nothing to do with Irene; in some ways his feelings toward her hadn't changed in about a decade. It had more to do with how he felt about life in general. Approaching forty, George felt

as though his world had been slowly drained of all its colors. He'd passed that age when he could reasonably expect to fall madly in love with someone and raise a family, or to take the world by storm, or to have anything surprising lift him out of his day-to-day existence. He would never have voiced these sentiments to anyone—after all, he was securely employed, living in the fair city of Boston, still possessed of all his hair—but he spent most days in a haze of disinterest. And while he was not yet pausing in front of funeral homes, he did feel as though he hadn't looked forward to anything in years. He had no interest in new friends or new relationships. At work, the paychecks had grown but his enthusiasm for his job had wavered. In years past he had felt a sense of pride and accomplishment with the publication of each monthly issue. These days he rarely read an article.

Approaching the tavern, George wondered what kind of mood Irene would be in tonight. He was sure to hear about the divorced editor at her office who had asked her out several times that summer. What if she agreed, and what if they became serious and George was finally thrown all the way to the curb? He tried to summon an emotion but instead found himself wondering what he would do with all the spare time. How would he fill it? And whom would he fill it with?

George pushed through the frosted-glass doors of Jack Crow's and walked directly to his usual booth. Later he realized he must have walked right by Liana Decter sitting at the corner of the bar. On other evenings, cooler ones, or ones when George was less dispirited about his lot in life, he might have surveyed the few patrons at his local tavern on a Friday night. There might even have been a time when George, catching sight of a lone curvy woman with pale skin, would have been jolted with the possibil-

ity that it was Liana. He'd spent twenty years both dreaming of and dreading the idea of seeing her again. He'd spotted variations of her across the world: her hair on a flight stewardess, the crushing lushness of her body on a Cape beach, her voice on a late-night jazz program. He'd even spent six months convinced that Liana had become a porn actress named Jean Harlot. He'd gone so far as to track down the actress's true identity. She was a minister's daughter from North Dakota named Carli Swenson.

George settled in his booth, ordered an old-fashioned from Trudy, the waitress, and removed that day's *Globe* from his well-worn messenger bag. He'd saved the crossword puzzle for this very occasion. Irene was meeting him, but not till six o'clock. He sipped at his drink and solved the puzzle, then reluctantly moved on to sudoku and even the jumble before he heard Irene's familiar steps behind him.

"Please, let's switch," she said by way of greeting, meaning their seats. Jack Crow's had only one television, a rarity in a Boston bar, and Irene, outranking George in her Red Sox loyalty and fandom, wanted the better view.

George slid out from the booth, kissed Irene on the side of her mouth (she smelled of Clinique and Altoids), and resettled on the other side, with its view of the oak bar and floor-to-ceiling windows. It was still light outside, a pink slice of sun just cresting over the brownstones across the street. The spread of light across the glass caused George to suddenly notice the lone woman at the corner of the bar. She was drinking a glass of red wine and reading a paperback, and a flutter in George's stomach told him that she looked like Liana. Just like Liana. But this was a flutter he'd experienced many times before.

He turned to Irene, who had swiveled toward the blackboard

behind the bar that listed the day's specials and the rotating beers. As always, she was unfazed by the heat, her short blond hair pushed off her forehead and curling back behind her ears. Her cat's-eye glasses had pink frames. Had they always?

After ordering an Allagash White, Irene updated George on the continuing saga of the divorced editor. George was relieved that Irene's initial tone was chatty and nonconfrontational. Stories of the editor tended toward the humorous anecdote, even though George was apt to detect a critical undertone. This editor might be chubby and ponytailed and a dedicated microbrewer, but at least with him there was a palpable future consisting of something more than cocktails and laughs and the very occasional sex that George offered these days.

He listened and sipped his drink but kept his eye on the woman at the bar. He was waiting for a gesture or a detail to disabuse him of the notion that he was actually looking at Liana Decter and not a ghost version or some doppelganger. If it was Liana, she'd changed. Not in any obvious way, like putting on a hundred pounds or cutting all her hair off, but she looked altered somehow, in a good way, as though she'd finally grown into the rare beauty that her features had always promised. She'd lost the baby fat she had in college, the bones of her face were more prominent, and her hair was a darker blond than George remembered. The more George stared, the more he became convinced it was her.

"You know I'm not the jealous type," Irene said, "but who do you keep looking at?" She craned her neck to look back toward the rapidly filling bar area.

"Someone I went to college with, I think. I can't be sure."

"Go ask her. I won't mind."

"No, that's okay. I barely knew her," George lied, and something about the lie caused a spidery ripple of agitation to race across the back of his neck.

They ordered more drinks. "He sounds like a little prick," George said.

"Huh?"

"Your divorcé."

"Ah, you still care." She slid out of the booth to go to the restroom, and this gave George a moment to really stare across the room at Liana. She'd become partially blocked by a pair of young businessmen removing their jackets and loosening their ties, but in between their maneuverings he studied her. She was wearing a white collared shirt, and her hair, a little shorter than it had been in college, hung down on one side of her face and was tucked behind an ear on the other. She wore no jewelry, something George remembered about her. There was an indecent creaminess to her neck and a mottled flash of crimson at her breastbone. She'd put away her paperback and now seemed, as she occasionally surveyed the bar, to be looking for someone. George was waiting for her to get up and move; he felt that until he saw her walk he could not be sure.

As though his thinking it had made it happen, she slid off the padded stool, her skirt briefly bunching at midthigh. As soon as her feet touched the floor and she began to walk in George's direction, there was no doubt. It had to be Liana, the first time he'd seen her since his freshman year at Mather College, nearly twenty years ago. Her walk was unmistakable, a slow tilting roll of the hips, her head held high and back as though she were trying to see over someone's head. George lifted a menu to cover his face and stared at its meaningless words. His heart thudded

in his chest. Despite the air conditioning, George could feel his palms start to dampen.

Liana passed just as Irene slid back into the booth. "There's your friend. You didn't want to say hello?"

"I'm still not sure if it's her," George said, wondering if Irene could hear the dry panic in his voice.

"Got time for another drink?" Irene asked. She had reapplied her lipstick in the bathroom.

"Sure," George said. "But let's go somewhere else. We could walk a little bit while it's still light."

Irene signaled the waiter, and George reached for his wallet. "My turn, remember," Irene said and removed a credit card from her bottomless purse. While she paid the check, Liana walked past again. This time George could stare at her retreating figure, that familiar walk. She'd grown into her body too. George thought she'd been his ideal in college, but if anything she looked better now: long tapering legs and exaggerated curves, the kind of body that only genetics, not exercise, will ever get you. The backs of her arms were pale as milk.

George had imagined this moment many times but had somehow never imagined the outcome. Liana was not simply an ex-girlfriend who had once upon a time broken George's heart; she was also, as far as George still knew, a wanted criminal, a woman whose transgressions were more in line with those of Greek tragedy than youthful indiscretion. She had, without doubt, murdered one person and most likely murdered another. George felt the equal weights of moral responsibility and indecision weigh down upon him.

"Coming?" Irene stood, and George did as well, following her brisk heel-first pace along the painted wooden floors of the bar.

Nina Simone's "Sinnerman" rat-a-tatted on the speakers. They swung through the front doors, the still-humid evening greeting them with its wall of stale, steamy air.

"Where to next?" Irene asked.

George froze. "I don't know. Maybe I just feel like going home."

"Okay," Irene said, then added, when George still hadn't moved, "or we could just stand out here in the rain forest."

"I'm sorry, but I suddenly don't feel so great. Maybe I'll just go home."

"Is it that woman at the bar?" Irene arched her neck to peer back through the frosted glass of the front door. "That's not what's-her-name, is it? That crazy girl from Mather."

"God, no," George lied. "I think I'll just call it a night."

George walked home. A breeze had picked up and was whistling through the narrow streets of Beacon Hill. The breeze wasn't cool, but George held out his arms anyway and could feel the sweat evaporating off his skin.

When George got to his apartment, he sat down on the first step of the exterior stairway. It was only a couple of blocks back to the bar. He could have one drink with her, find out what brought her to Boston. He had waited so long to see her, imagining the moment, that now, with her actually here, he felt like an actor in a horror flick with his hand on the barn door about to get an ax in his head. He was scared, and for the first time in about a decade he longed for a cigarette. Had she come to Jack Crow's to look for him? And if so, why?

On almost any other night, George could have entered his apartment, fed Nora, and crawled into his bed. But something about the weight of that particular August night, combined with

Liana's presence at his favorite bar, made it seem as though something was about to happen, and that was all he needed. Good or bad, something was happening.

George sat long enough to begin to believe that she must have left the bar. How long would she really sit there by herself with her glass of red wine? He decided to walk back. If she was gone, then he wasn't meant to see her again. If she was still there, then he'd say hello.

As he walked back to the bar the breeze pressing against his back felt both warmer and stronger. At Jack Crow's, he didn't hesitate—he swung back through the door and, as he did, Liana, from her spot at the bar, turned her head and looked at him. He watched her eyes brighten a little in recognition. She had never been one for outsize gestures.

"It *is* you," he said.

"It is. Hi, George." She said it with the flat intonation he remembered, as casually as though she'd seen him earlier that day.

"I saw you from over there." George tilted his head toward the back of the bar. "I wasn't sure it was you at first. You've changed a little, but then, walking past you, I was pretty sure. I got halfway down the street and turned back."

"I'm glad you did," she said. Her words, carefully spaced, had a little click at the end. "I actually came here . . . to this bar . . . to look for you. I know that you live near here."

"Oh."

"I'm glad you spotted me first. I don't know if I would have had the courage to go up to you. I know how you must feel about me."

"Then you know more than I do. I don't exactly know how I feel about you."

"I mean about what happened." She hadn't changed position since he'd come back into the bar, but one of her fingers gently tapped on the wooden bar to the percussive music.

"Right, that," George said, as though he were searching in his memory banks for what she could be talking about.

"Right, that," she repeated back, and they both laughed. Liana shifted her body around to face George more squarely. "Should I be worried?"

"Worried?"

"Citizen's arrest? Drink thrown in my face?" She had developed tiny laugh lines at the edge of her pale blue eyes. Something new.

"The police are on their way right now. I'm just stalling you." George kept smiling, but it felt unnatural. "I'm kidding," he said when Liana didn't immediately speak.

"No, I know. Would you like to sit? You have time for a drink?"

"Actually . . . I'm meeting someone, in just a little bit." The lie slid out of George easily. His head was suddenly muddled by her close presence, by the smell of her skin, and he had an almost animal urge to escape.

"Oh. That's fine," Liana quickly said. "But I do have something I need to ask you. It's a favor."

"Okay."

"Can we meet somewhere? Maybe tomorrow."

"Do you live here?"

"No, I'm just in town for . . . I'm visiting a friend, really. . . . It's complicated. I would like to talk with you. I'd understand if you didn't, of course. This was a long shot, and I understand—"

"Okay," George said, telling himself he could change his mind later.

"Okay, yes, you'd like to talk?"

"Sure, let's meet while you're in town. I promise I won't call the feds. I just want to know how you're doing."

"Thank you so much. I appreciate it." She took a large breath through her nostrils, her chest expanding. George somehow heard the rustle of her crisp white shirt across her skin above the sounds of the jukebox.

"How did you know I lived here?"

"I looked you up. Online. It wasn't that hard."

"I don't suppose you're still called Liana?"

"Some people. Not many. Most people know me as Jane now."

"Do you have a cell phone? Should I call you later?"

"I don't have a cell phone. I never have. Could we meet here again? Tomorrow. At noon." George noticed how her eyes subtly moved, searching his face, trying to read him. Or else she was looking for what was familiar and what had changed. George's hair had turned gray at the sides, his forehead had wrinkled, and the lines around his mouth had deepened. But he was still in relatively good shape, still handsome in a slightly hangdog way.

"Sure," George said. "We could meet here. They're open for lunch."

"You don't sound sure."

"I'm not sure, but I'm not unsure."

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"Okay," George said, again thinking that he could change his mind, that by agreeing he was only postponing a decision. Later George thought that there would have been times in his life when he simply would have told Liana that he didn't think they should see each other. He had no need for justice, not even any

real need for closure, and for that reason George didn't believe he would have alerted the authorities. The mess that she'd gotten involved in was many years in the past. But it was bad enough that she must have been running ever since, and she would have to continue running the rest of her life. Of course she didn't have a cell phone. And of course she wanted to meet somewhere public, a bar at an intersection in a busy part of Boston, somewhere she could take off from right away.

"Okay. I can come," George said.

She smiled. "I'll be here. Noon."

"I'll be here as well."