

Dennis Must

## The Tick A Tick A Tick

We were sitting in the White Horse Tavern late one August afternoon, discussing a play I'd written. Before an audience of me, a saturnine bartender, and an elderly woman nursing a beer in a dark corner, James mercilessly exposed the artificiality of written scripts, especially mine. Personas with beginnings, middles, and ends belong in toy boxes, he chided, and not on stage.

"The subtext is where the real truth lies, Christopher. Take the face off a clock, and you still hear the beat. Like the masks we wear in public, those numbers are lies.

"It's the *tick a tick a tick* what's chasing us, right? What are we gonna create of ourselves in the short amount of time we have to make any goddamn sense?" James laughed. "You get what I'm saying?"

He slid his empty glass before me, gesturing that I concentrate on it.

"Say your father gives you this when you're a kid—a jar with a screw lid. He says, 'Here, it's chock full of *tick a tick a ticks*. They all belong to you. You can't give 'em away to your friends, either. And when you've used them all up, there ain't no more. So now go make something with them, boy.'

"You hear him chortle behind your back.

"That first night, it sits on a stand alongside your bed. It's pitch black in your room. But there's a kind of glow in the jar. Fireflies maybe. Except you can only hear 'em.

"Then you realize that the glass jar is your heart ... 'cause when it stops making *tick a tick a tick* ... you fucking die.

"That's when you become bloody anxious, Christopher. *Why should a kid have to worry?* I ask. But you do because there it is next to you ... your entire life radiant inside that glass container. And you know you got to make those *tick a tick a ticks* mean something ... otherwise what the hell was the sense of ever being given them?

"Make something of yourself, boy.'

"You look around and think ... *What? I've been given this allotment of tick a tick*

a ticks, and I'm supposed to give them some meaning? And I hear my old man bleating alongside my momma in the bedroom.

"*That's what he's done with his tick a tick a ticks?*

"*Ain't gonna do that, I think.*

"Do that so I can lay my head 'tween some woman's tits and cry because I've squandered my *tick a tick a ticks* in self-pity?

"*Maybe I spend them like Momma. But why? 'Cause I got some pious notion that I must sacrifice them for someone who needs me? Locking my tick a tick a ticks in a glass jar until it's too fucking late? Light inside them's all spent. And my old man is still warbling like Chet Baker in the dark from another room?*

"So you see what I'm saying?"

The bartender, who had been standing nearby, intently absorbed, interrupted with a second round of bourbon. "On the house." He grinned mirthlessly. We clinked glasses, and James resumed.

"As each year passed, I took the jar out from under my bed and studied it. How could you not be goaded by the fact that slowly the *tick a tick a ticks* were escaping and you hadn't become anything yet? Oh yeah, I was still a pimply-faced kid, but so was every other screw my age. And what about the pulse under their beds? Some of 'em acted as if they could have given a shit their *tick a tick a ticks* were breaking loose.

"But not me, Christopher.

"I wanted to become someone. Some person other than the tedious swells in town ... the bankers, doctors, or lawyers. I didn't want to be any of these characters. You know why? *Because they all acted as if life somehow made goddamn sense.* That it was like a story unfolding. And some doddering grandmother or grandfather was reading it to them at bedtime.

"Well, that wasn't me, brother.

"I wanted to exchange my *tick a tick a ticks* in for somebody new. Somebody who saw through all the bromides like, *Let's make house, get married, have babies, and buy a little place with a white picket fence.* For what? So that one day I awake and see it's all been a fucking gloss I've been living? Then reach under the bed to discover the fireflies are asleep in Jesus?

"Early on, I willed to rip off the mask of what I'd been conditioned to think of as reality: a warm bath of deceit and self-delusion."

James glanced at me and then at the bartender and the woman in the corner, each of us waiting for him to continue ... a performer caught in mid-sentence. For a brief, moment his face registered, *Why are you staring at me?*

"Please go on," I said.

“Is the audience always this small?” he japed.

I was accustomed to his habit of evading issues that became too personal and continued locking eyes with him.

He took another drink before resuming.

“Christopher, at times in my father’s final days, I’d catch him sitting alone long after midnight at our kitchen table. Maybe I was just getting home. He’d be lost in thought, staring at this little jelly jar that he drank cheap whiskey out of. No water, no rocks.

“And I’d think to myself ... *Hell, that’s his tick a tick a tick jar. And poor Dad is staring at it ‘cause it’s about goddamn empty.* His life he’s pissed out, and he’s wondering what

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he’d made out of all those *tick a tick a ticks* dealt him early on.

“Very fucking little.

“And when he’d finally look up and see me, he’d raise the glass, gesturing as if he was to pour me one. I’d decline.

“‘Cause it was empty.

“*You’re offering me nothing,* I’d think. It’s just another story like the millions I’ve already known, Pap. They all start and end the same. And what am I to learn after you’ve drunk your last *tick a tick*, old man? I could get drunk on the tears of emptiness.

“Yet a wave of compassion would sweep over me.

“His hapless look of *Well, I gave it my best shot, boy.*

“And I’d wonder, *Christ, is this the stuff that you and I are made of?* He gave it his best shot? What the hell did that mean? That he’d made choices demonstrating some character that he chose not to pretend he was somebody he wasn’t, nor could ever become, even in three bottles of *tick a tick a ticks*?

“It was a pathetic and tormented defense, I thought. But what are our options, Christopher?

“You see? That’s what I’ve been asking myself.

“Despite my affection, nay, fucking unabashed love for the guy, I swore I was going to be everything he wasn’t. No bloody woman was going to nurse me as a broken man that he had permitted himself to become. No woman would ever watch me hold my jelly jar up to my ear, then listen to me cry about what I’d fucking spent on nothing.

“I swore, Christopher, that I was going to break out of the story-book mold of what constitutes a life and how to live it. That life is a series of heartaches, and we are little more than nasturtium seeds in a garden patch looked over by some mythical god. Once

we flower and produce, soon after we die. The story ends on a melancholic note.

“Well, when I saw him staring into that glass of time that evening while contemplating all the *tick a tick a ticks* he’d clocked in a timepiece of no hands, as if he had lifted his own anemic heart out of his chest and was studying to see just how little life remained...

“I wanted to draw his head into my chest and say, *Listen to mine, Pap. Hear it fucking beat? Do you hear the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh like the waves slapping the underside of the dock in the lakeside cabin we used to visit with Momma? And you’d say to me, ‘Don’t go out there on the lake at night, boy, alone. ‘Cause if something would ever happen, I wouldn’t be able to see to get to you.’*

“*But I never believed that, you see, because I knew down deep that even if it was so pitch black that you could see not even the backs of your hands before you, you still would have splashed into that water and paddled. God knows to where. But you would have paddled, calling out for me.*

“*That’s what I know.*

“*So feel my tick a tick a ticks, old man. I’ll share them with you. Hold onto them, and we’ll fucking go somewhere. Downstream maybe. Upstream perhaps. But we ain’t gonna go back home.*

“*Where your story now lies between the covers.*

“*It has an ending.*

“*And if that’s so ... you will never hear my cry when it gets dark and I’ve lost my way.*

“*So hold on, old man.*

“*The jelly jar is full of lies.*

“*That’s all that you’ve spent.*

“*Lies.*

“*We’ve got a long swim ahead of us. Put your arms around me. I’ll stroke. You sing.*”

“And at night sometimes when I’m lying awake, Christopher, I hear him crying for me out in that dark lake. He’s saying, *Over here, Son.* But there ain’t no light he’s holding. I can’t see his eyes ‘cause the light inside ‘em’s flickered out. And I can’t hear him paddling ‘cause he’s no strength left in his arms. Yet his voice is as clear as when he used to sing behind me.

“And some nights, I laugh and cry, *Fucking sing like Chet Baker, and then perhaps I can get a bead on just where you are. Just so I can get closer to you, Pap.*

“*Let’s Get Lost.*”

Like so often following a performance, James uttered a self-effacing laugh, then bowed theatrically to a rapt bartender, the ashen-faced grass widow in the corner, and me.

Before vanishing.