

STUCK IN TIME

NOX

"...Living by your wits is always knowing where the wasps are," I read. And then yawned. I looked up at the clock and noticed it was a quarter past three. Quarantine had really robbed me of all sense of time. I was lucky if I slept by dawn and awoke before sunset.

I would also get hungry at all hours of the day. Somehow healthy eating seemed to be very low on the list of priorities at the moment, which mostly consisted of stressing about things that were out of my control, and making sure I kept all the demons locked up nice and tight. Introspection, with all its marvellous repercussions, was a luxury I could not afford while being trapped in this hellhole.

Of course the new routine did have its perks, I conceded, as I left my room to grab some grub. It allowed for the sweet pleasure of evading the presence, and thereby the combined look of displeasure and disappointment, of every other living being in this household. With no outlet to confront me, their constant complaints about my "unacceptable behaviour", and concerns that my life was "spinning out of control" were stacking up like a perfectly constructed Jenga pile. They would love to collapse the entire setup on my seemingly unburdened mind any day now, but three weeks in, I had managed to avoid engaging them all, and I had no intention of changing that score any time soon. If I did silently lie in bed and listen to them in the living room go on about me for hours on end, I saw no reason to make them aware of such conduct.

I kept the doorknob turned while shutting the door behind me, in order to remain as silent as possible, letting the knob slowly ease back when the door was already shut. I had had to sneak around this house for over a decade now. When it came to making my way around these floors, I was as dead silent as a cat right before it's about to pounce.

I made my way through the corridor that joined my room to the rest of the flat and crossed the empty dining room to get to the fridge on the other side. The fridge was silent, the microwave was not, which meant my options were restricted to cheese, chocolates, and an orange that looked hopefully up at me from the bottom shelf.

"Can't have you, I'm afraid. You're too much trouble to cut up at this moment," I whispered to the orange, and then, taking a minute to consider, picked the block of cheddar over the bar of Whittaker's. To be fair, I'd have to slice this too, but I had realised I wasn't in the mood for a sweet treat.

I closed the door to the fridge, turned around with the block of cheese in hand, and almost immediately dropped it. Well, nearly. I managed to grab it mid-drop so that only the quietest crinkle of the plastic covering carried through the air.

My sudden clumsiness was a result of the fact that I was no longer alone. Sitting across the room at the head of the dining table was my sister, Srishtee. I rolled my eyes at her while shaking my head.

"What are you doing here? You almost gave me a heart attack," I said.

"What are you doing eating cheese this late at night? You know that stuff gives you acidity," she replied in turn.

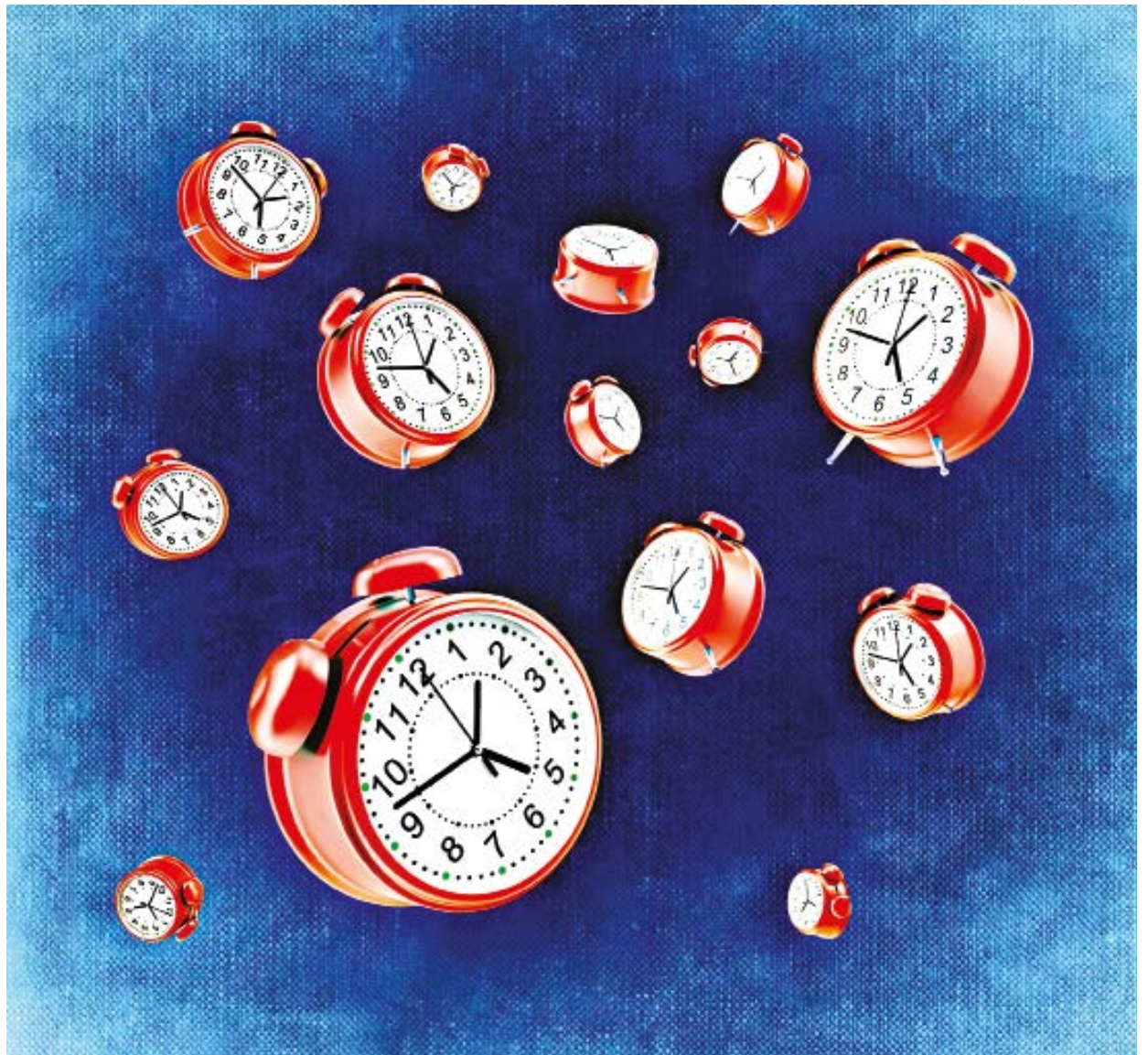
"I'll take my chances. Dad scrapes off way too much of this stuff everyday anyway. If I don't take my share at night he'll finish it off without me getting to even try it."

This time she was the one to shake her head. "The lactose intolerance denial just runs in the family."

I snorted at this and made my way around her to get to the kitchen. To be completely honest, the kitchen always spooked me after dark, especially if I had to open any of the cabinets under the sink. Who knew what I would witness one of these days in there? Given the current situation, the irony of that statement wasn't lost on me.

Fortunately, all I needed today was a knife and a plate, both resting on the countertop. Regardless, my pace still quickened, almost subconsciously, as I turned my back on the kitchen to make my way to the safety of the dining room again. *Definitely spooky*, I thought, a slight shiver running down my back as I finally stepped out of that room.

Srishtee was still sitting silently where I'd last seen her, fiddling with her nails.



"I'm telling you," she started, once I'd settled myself on the chair to her left, "you shouldn't be eating that right now. Go put it back."

"Or what? You'll tell mom?" I asked with a snort.

"I could, you know," she said with a smirk.

"Oh Lord please let me be a fly on the wall for that conversation," I said without missing a beat.

Then we both burst out laughing. So hard, in fact, that we were practically doubled up, wheezing.

Once the laughter had subsided, and the tears wiped, I started slicing my cheese. The cheddar had a very strong aroma, which I absolutely loved, and Srishtee couldn't stand. She stared at me, quietly, but with an expression of mild disgust, as I helped myself to a few slices of varying thickness.

After a while, just to mess with her I raised the plate towards her and said, "Want some?"

She rolled her eyes at me and replied, "Urgh, not even if you paid me to."

"Hmm, I wonder what you'd do with the money," I mused.

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know," said Srishtee, with a knowing smirk.

"Actually, I don't think I would. Some mysteries are just meant to remain mysteries, y'know?"

"Yeah," she said, looking down, suddenly sombre, "I know."

Instantly I felt my throat seize up. A lump the size of a chicken's egg had lodged itself into my chest. I gulped, and blinked back the moisture that was threatening to well up in my eyes.

"Hey, lighten up," I said, my voice cracking only the slightest amount. "Guess what? Chachi is going to tell Dadu that she wants to move out of this house."

"No way! That's an argument I'll be around for," she

said.

"We should probably clear out the furniture for it though," I said, chuckling.

"I doubt Chachi's going to throw another chair. Been there done that, you know? Maybe she'll poison her food this time..." she considered thoughtfully.

"Remember the time when..."

It worked. She was quickly hooked onto the familiar gossip, forgetting her prior mood. Or maybe she pretended for me, as I did for her.

We talked for what seemed like hours. I remembered to put the cheese away. I also washed my plate and knife, preferring the sink in the dining room over the one in the kitchen, to get rid of all evidence of my midnight snack. We chatted through it all, Srishtee following me around the house.

We were sitting at the dining table again when we heard the grandfather clock in the living room strike five.

"I have to go now," said Srishtee with a sigh.

"Yeah...me too. Mom will be up any minute now," I said, getting up. Srishtee remained seated.

"Well...good night," she said.

"Good... Whatever time it is over there," I said, turning away and walking towards my room.

"Actually, there is no time at all there. That concept only exists on this plane," I heard her say.

"Wait what?" I exclaimed, stopping in my tracks. I turned around, only to be met with an empty table and six unoccupied chairs.

"Oops," said a disembodied voice from somewhere above, followed by a peal of mischievous laughter.

Nox endlessly worries about hostile alien surveillance. Increase this paranoid person's online footprint with feedback at nox.thewriter@gmail.com