



Youth Short Story – Winner 2026

THE TIMEKEEPER

By Haya Al-Bajalan

My father's hands always smelled of copper dust and oil. He was a clockmaker, a man who could fix anything with gears and a pair of tweezers. To him, time wasn't just something that passed; it was something you could catch, hold, and build. As a little girl, I would sit on a stool beside his workbench for hours, mesmerised by the ticking walls. The handmade clocks were like little brass hearts beating in the dark.

Whenever I stared too closely at the gears, he would laugh. "Such an imaginative person, my girl," he would say, tapping my nose. "She has no boundaries to her curiosity."

He was right. I wanted to know how everything worked. I wanted to find every hidden secret in the world, never realising that some secrets are too heavy to carry.

In the centre of his shop sat the only clock I was never allowed to touch. It was a

timepiece made of dark wood. Beneath its brass pendulum was a note: “One deed for one minute.” For years, I thought it was a riddle.

“What a silly mystery,” I would laugh. My father never said a word in response. How wrong I was!

The meaning came to light on the morning the world broke. I was twelve, and he was walking me to school under a grey sky. He never usually walked me to school, so I was surprised when he offered. As we walked together, his steps felt heavy against the sidewalk. Outside the school gates, his grip on my hand tightened. It wasn’t a normal squeeze; it felt like he was trying to hold onto the world itself. Before I could ask what was wrong, he collapsed.

His heart had stopped. The ambulance came and declared it a sudden cardiac arrest.

I went back to the empty shop that afternoon, my heart wrapped in grief. The silence was broken only by the ticking of his clocks: my father’s clocks. Needing to feel close to him and driven by curiosity, I finally walked over to the forbidden clock, the same one that I would laugh at.

Hidden beneath the clock was my father’s journal, covered in soft velvet fabric, with a picture of us in the centre. As I flipped through the pages, everything clicked into place. The clock didn’t just tell time; it traded it. Every time our family experienced a miracle, like when my childhood fever miraculously broke or the winter when an anonymous envelope of money kept us from starving because my father had made a deal. Each good thing that happened to us cost him a minute of his life. He had been giving away his own breath, tick by tick, to buy my future.

On the last page, the ink was fresh. It looked like it had been written hours before we walked to school:

“The world is dangerous, and my time is up. She must make it to the gates safely today. One last miracle. One last minute. The pendulum cannot stop; the clock demands a successor. My curious girl is the new Timekeeper. May this world rest peacefully in her hands.”

He had sacrificed his final sixty seconds of life to make sure I got to school safely. And there, resting beside his open journal, a brass key waited for me.

The brass key felt cold and awkward in my hand. I stared at the last lines my father had written, my eyes stinging with tears that blurred his messy handwriting. He was gone. But around me, the clocks hadn't stopped. They felt louder now, ticking away as if nothing had happened.

The clock in the middle of the room sat there, its dark wood looking more imposing than usual.

I was only twelve. I didn't want a legacy, and I didn't want the weight of the world on my shoulders. I just wanted my dad back.

With shaking fingers, I picked up the key. It felt strangely heavy for its size, with ridges carved into the top that dug into my thumb. I walked over to the clock. For years, I had laughed at the note underneath it, treating it like a joke. Now, knowing it had cost my dad his life, the thing terrified me.

I found the keyhole hidden under the swinging pendulum. The moment I slotted the key in and gave it a turn, a sharp clack echoed through the room. The pendulum froze. And so did everything else.

Outside the window, a pigeon was stuck in mid-air, its wings spread wide but motionless. A leaf hung suspended above the concrete. In the shop, the ticking of dozens of

clocks died. The silence was so sudden it made my ears ring. The only sound left was the ragged gasps of my breathing.

“Don’t leave it frozen for too long, kid. It gets harder to restart,” a voice said from the back corner.

I jumped, dropping my dad’s journal onto the floor with a dull thud. Leaning against a shelf of spare parts was a woman in an oversized charcoal coat. She had streaks of silver in her dark hair and looked tired, like she hadn’t slept in a week, but there was an intense calmness about her.

“Who are you?” I choked out, backing away until my spine hit the workbench. “How are you moving?”

“I’m Clara,” she said, stepping into the light. “I help keep track of the balances. Your dad and I worked together. When a Timekeeper dies, everything pauses until the next person takes over. Your dad used his last minute to stop a truck that blew through the red light outside your school. He knew his time was up anyway, so he traded his final sixty seconds to push you out of its path.”

A lump formed in my throat. A truck. He didn’t just have a heart attack; he had given up his last breath so I could keep taking mine.

“Here’s the deal,” Clara said, pointing at the wooden clock.

“One good deed for one minute. If you turn that key the rest of the way and push the pendulum, you accept the job. You can fix things for people, save them when they’re desperate. But it comes out of your own bank. Every miracle you give away chips time off your own life. If you walk away, the magic breaks, and everything your dad ever bought for this town resets. The people he saved? Their luck runs out.”

I looked out at the frozen street. I thought about Mrs Higgins next door, whose cancer had vanished overnight three years ago. I thought about the local grocery store that survived a gas leak without a scratch. And I thought about my childhood fevers. If I said no, all of his sacrifices meant nothing. He would have died for a broken system.

I looked at my hands. They were small, but they were shaped like his. I had spent my whole life being curious about how things worked, wanting to fix what was broken. I couldn't walk away now.

I turned back to the clock, gripped the brass key, and forced it clockwise until it clicked into place. Then, I reached out and gave the pendulum a push.

Tick.

Tock.

Outside, the pigeon flapped its wings and flew away. The leaf hit the pavement. The shop erupted back to life with the symphony of ticking gears.

When I spun around, Clara was gone. The only sign she'd been there was the faint smell of old paper and rain. I looked down at my right wrist and winced. A thin white line had appeared across my skin, pulsing before fading into a scar. My first minute was gone just to start the machine.

My dad was right. Some secrets are too heavy to carry. But as I locked up the shop and slid the key into my pocket, I knew I wasn't going anywhere. I was the new Timekeeper, and my shift had started.

Five years passed, and the ticking of the shop became my second heartbeat.

I was seventeen now, but I felt much older. Every time I turned the brass key to fix a tragedy, the clock exacted its toll. A neighbour's ruined harvest cost an hour; stopping a toddler from falling out of a second-story window took a day. With every trade, a new white scar wrapped around my right wrist like wire. My skin was becoming a map of stolen moments, and my body always felt heavy, as if carrying the weight of time itself.

I tried to be disciplined, only using the power when necessary. But the town had a way of bleeding into the shop.

On a stormy Tuesday evening, just as I was turning the sign to "Closed," the front door burst open. The brass bell chimed frantically. It was Leo, a quiet boy from my chemistry class. He was soaking wet, shivering, and carrying his seven-year-old sister, Maya, in his arms. She was still, her face the colour of winter frost.

"Leo? What happened?" I rushed around the counter, clearing a space on my dad's old workbench.

"A car slid on the ice near the bridge," Leo choked out, his voice cracking. He gently laid his sister down. "The ambulance is delayed because of the storm. The dispatcher told me to wait, but she stopped breathing. I remembered the rumours about your dad. Please, Nova. They say your family can fix things that are broken."

My heart hammered against my ribs. I looked at the little girl, then up at the dark wooden clock. To jumpstart a failing heart and reverse internal trauma wouldn't take a minute, or even a day. A miracle of this size would demand years.

I looked down at my scarred wrist. If I did this, I would be giving away a massive chunk of my youth. I might never grow old. I might never leave this town.

But then I looked at Leo's face. His eyes were wide with panic that I recognised

instantly. It was the same look I had in the mirror the day my father collapsed outside the school gates. I had been alone in that silence. I couldn't let Leo stand in it, either.

“Step back,” I whispered, my voice steady.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the brass key. My hands, smelling of copper dust and oil, didn't shake this time. I slotted the key into the forbidden clock and twisted it hard.

Clack.

The storm outside froze. The rain droplets hung in the air like glass beads. The silence returned, heavy.

I stepped up to the little girl, placed my hands over her chest, and closed my eyes. Then, I turned the key all the way to the right, feeling a sharp pull within my chest as the clock drank my life force. With everything I had left, I reached out and slammed the pendulum forward.

Tick.

Tock.

Thunder crashed outside. The rain slammed against the glass. On the workbench, the little girl gasped, colour rushing back into her cheeks as she opened her eyes.

I stumbled backward, catching myself on the edge of the desk. I looked down at my arm. The white scars were gone, replaced by a glowing golden band that burned itself into my skin, marking the five years I had surrendered. I breathed out, tired but smiling, as Leo sobbed and pulled his sister into a tight hug.

My father was right. Some secrets are too heavy to carry. But as I watched the two siblings, I realised that carrying them is what keeps the world from falling apart, and that is the greatest gift I can give.