

If Not Now, When?

Jacob Galatin

Online, in the cloud, you will find the room of the broken, yet ever-ticking clock.

There, rough plaster walls enclose four prisoners sitting at a mahogany table. Each prisoner is assigned a glass of milk. The glasses spawn the white liquid, needing only thin air to refill.

After a day's long intermission or 86,400 ticks from the broken clock, a prisoner grabs her glass. It's as if her hand is grasping for air. She quivers. Her cracked lips part and each gulp echoes in harmony with the ticking of the clock.

The other prisoners fill with envy, though they cannot speak; their tongues are long-dead.

How come she could drink, and not them? One disgusted prisoner cannot help but jolt forward in her chair.

This time, the prisoner's glass refills with expired milk, a sure sign that their sentence will end soon. A sour stench engulfs the room, and the prisoners flick their glasses out of anticipation. *Clink. Clink.*

They look forward to their freedom or in other words, to the broken clock falling from the wall.

Five minutes go by and the clock ceases ticking. *Clink. Clink. Clink. Clink.*

But nothing else changes, so the prisoners' fill with rage. No door opens. No cavity appears in the wall. Nobody's glass chains break.

The prisoners violently twist their necks, trying to find the oathbreaker, though they have no memory of him.

It's helpless, no one is there to answer them.

Then, without warning, one prisoner flicks her glass of milk.

Why? Because just maybe, she supposes, the noise could awaken the one who lied to them all.

The other prisoners respond with a deafening silence. She flicks her glass once more.

This time, another prisoner joins in. Then another and another, like a blind mob.

Convinced their uncouth symphony would set them free, the prisoners flick harder and harder. It's not enough and they muster all their strength to boost the rate of flicking—now one clink per second. One prisoner realizes that glass doesn't bend—it breaks, and her flicking turns to hitting, turns to pounding, turns to grasping the glass, turns to gripping, turns to clutching. Her face reddens—she's about to pass out. And yet, on nothing but two percent, she tilts the glass, she thrusts her arm and hurls the glass into the void below.

The clock falls from the wall.

I sobbed once I learned I hadn't aged a day during my 50-year sentence. The prison was just the chip they put inside my head—a "humane" replacement for the real deal. It took 45 real years

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to convince myself that there was no prison on 59
Sage Drive, Tustin, CA.

Learning what was real wasn't even the worst
part though; I think I'll get used to the world
again. What I'll never get used to is this weird
thirst for milk...