

# Scene

By Jenny Ji

It seemed that for the past five years, the grandfather clock's hands had been permanently stuck, hovering right before twelve and occasionally twitching in place but never once quite hitting it. It was hard to tell if the aged clock had its final moments of working glory at noon or at midnight, but nevertheless, the chime never sounded.

She craned her neck to reach the clock's wooden tip, mumbling to herself the same thing for the umpteenth time as she swept a wet rag over it. "Why doesn't he ever listen to me and get rid of this useless piece of wood?" She shook her head annoyedly, not sure how many times she had said the exact same words. Something caught her vision.

Her hand hovered over the glass case, frozen in silent shock as she looked to find a woman trapped inside. The woman was unfamiliar, her eyes sunken in and her hair a snowy white.

Scared, she dropped the rag, scrambling away from the clock in small steps. From a distance, she took a double take, breathing in a sigh of relief when she realized it was only the sun's glare reflecting on the glass.

Once again, she shook her head in annoyance. "Why doesn't he ever listen to me and get rid of this useless piece of wood?" She paused, wondering if she was forgetting something very important, but the thought was short-lived—the burning smell enough to distract her thoughts.

"Oh my!" she screamed in horror to find the mess on the stove, a few charred and shriveled remains of what used to be bok choy. Her heart somersaulted as she lifted the lid on the pot. Luckily, the chicken soup had survived the disaster. At least her granddaughter's favorite dish would be servable once she was back from school, she thought while cursing, "That old man! Why would you leave something on the stove when you go out without telling me!"

Out of habit, she reached for the phone, her fingers automatically dialing the string of familiar numbers. Calling her husband, she had a million things to complain about, but the moment she heard his voice, every single insult she had prepared faded away.

“How long does it take to pick A’Miao up from school!” she chided.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

“Hello, my love, I miss you so much. I’m so glad that you still remember me. I’m on my way home. I miss you so...so much.”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A knock sounded at her door, and she rushed to open it. But when she found a girl in her twenties standing at the doorstep with a basket of fruit, her expression of disappointment was obvious. “Who are you?” she asked, racking her mind to see where she saw this girl before.

The girl only smiled before walking inside and setting the fruit on the tabletop.

“Who are you?” the woman repeated, a bit alarmed. “What are you doing in my home?”

The girl only smiled again, “My name is Hu Miao. I’m here to take care of you.”

The woman froze, her carefully guarded expression suddenly widening into a bright smile, almost as she were in a trance. “That’s the name of my granddaughter too. I knew my husband should have given her a less common name!” She chuckled to herself. “She’s this tall,” she gestured happily to her waist, “But boy, she grows quickly. She’ll grow to your height someday.”

The woman reached for a framed photo. In the picture, a wide-eyed little girl in pig tails clung happily to an elderly man. “I like you. You have the same eyes as my granddaughter.”

Without speaking, the girl picked up the rag still sitting on the living room floor before scrubbing away at the charred stove.

“She’ll be back from school soon.” The woman reached for her phone to ask why her husband was taking so long again, completely forgetting that she had a stranger in the house.

“How long does it take to pick A’Miao up from school!” she chided.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

“Hello, my love, I miss you so much. I’m so glad that you still remember me. I’m on my way home. I miss you so...so much.”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Outside, the sky was dark. The woman suddenly remembered what was so important. Reaching for the rag, she headed over to polish the clock.