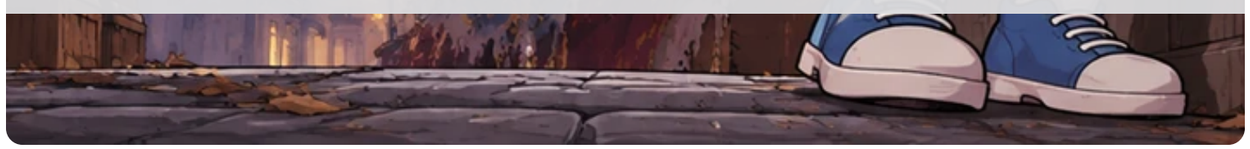


The Ten O'Clock Strings

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The morning sun cast a golden glow over the quiet streets of Chronoville, where every household lived by one strict and unusual rule. Children were required to be fast asleep by exactly ten o'clock in the morning, or risk facing a legendary visitor. Ten-year-old Oliver yawned loudly as he stared at the ticking hands of the old living room clock.



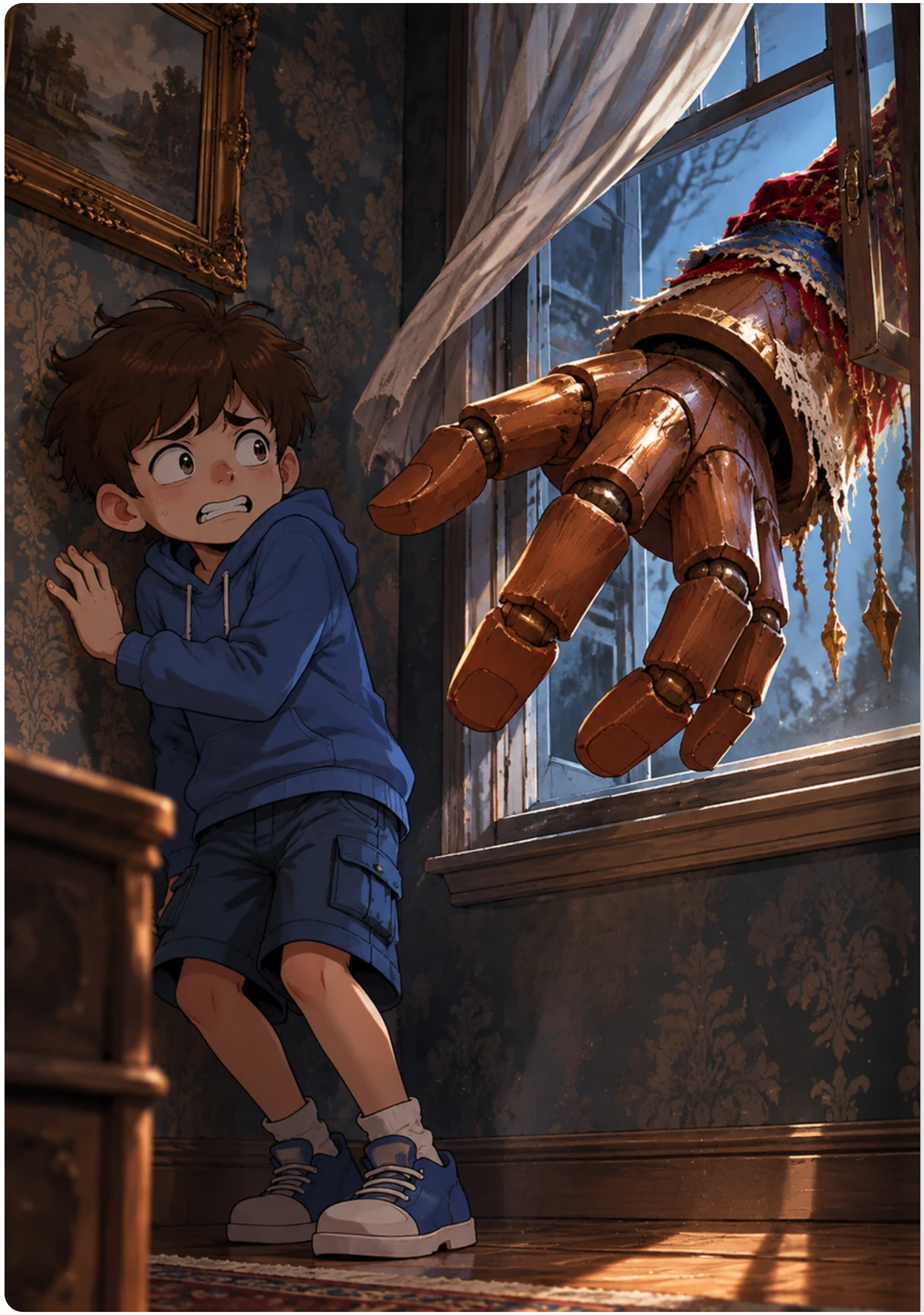
Oliver loved playing with his toy blocks far too much to heed the warnings of his elders. The clock hands slowly crept closer to the dreaded vertical alignment, marking the final moments before the deadline. Dust motes danced in the sunbeams, entirely unaware of the sudden chill that began to sweep through the room.



With a dramatic chime, the grandfather clock struck ten, its resonant gong echoing through the empty hallway. Suddenly, the shadows outside the window stretched and twisted into long, angular shapes. Oliver froze in place, his toy blocks tumbling from his hands as he realized he had failed to fall asleep in time.



From the cobblestone streets below arose the distinct, rhythmic clacking of wooden joints and creaking leather. A colossal silhouette loomed against the drawn curtains, casting a terrifying shadow across the nursery floor. Giant strings descended from the misty sky, dangling right outside the frosted windowpanes.



The window slowly pushed open with a soft groan, letting in a cool breeze scented with old sawdust and stardust. A massive, jointed hand made of polished mahogany reached into the room, its wooden fingers clicking together like castanets. Oliver pressed himself flat against the wallpaper, holding his breath as the giant puppet searched the corners.



Two large glass eyes, shimmering with the colors of a twilight sky, scanned the nursery with mechanical precision. The puppet monster, carved from ancient timber and dressed in velvet remnants, stepped partially into the room. Its wooden joints creaked softly as it took a step toward Oliver's hiding spot behind the bookshelf.



Knowing that running was useless, Oliver remembered the old town folklore that sleep was the only true shield against the puppet. He closed his eyes tightly, forcing his racing heart to slow down as he pretended to drift into a deep slumber. The massive wooden face leaned in close, the gentle draft of its breath fluttering his eyelashes.



For a tense moment, the gentle ticking of the monster's internal gears was the only sound in the silent room. Then, the glowing glass eyes softened, and the giant puppet realized the boy had finally yielded to sleep. With a gentle, echoing sigh that sounded like rustling autumn leaves, the creature stepped back toward the open window.



The wooden strings retracted smoothly into the clouds, pulling the colossal visitor back up into the mysterious realm of limbo. Oliver opened one eye slowly, watching as the towering silhouette dissolved into the bright morning fog. He let out a massive sigh of relief, promising himself never to test the ten o'clock rule again.



The golden sunlight flooded back into the room as normalcy returned to the sleepy town of Chronoville. Oliver finally climbed under his cozy blanket, letting the warmth lull him into a peaceful and well-earned slumber. The streets remained quiet and safe, holding their secret until the next ticking of the clock.