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## South Carolina, 2012

Meredith Doench  
*University of Dayton*, [mdoench1@udayton.edu](mailto:mdoench1@udayton.edu)

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# South Carolina, 2012

Meredith Doench

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**M**y father lost the key more than a month ago. Since then, time has stopped on the old grandfather clock that he claims has been in his family for at least two generations, sometimes more depending on the day you ask him.

Thoughts of the past often mist across my father's eyes, a rheumy caul that signals he's gone back in his mind: "I remember working on this clock with my great-grandpa."

The facts, however, tell a different story; the great-grandfather in question died long before my father's birth and no other living relative remembers such an heirloom. The neurologist warned this would happen—indiscriminate fixations on random objects. As the neurons in my father's brain die, messages misfire, directions re-route, and memories completely fall apart.

Every Sunday evening is the designated grandfather clock winding time—colorful sticky reminders and random lists that line the kitchen counters tell my father so. He stands in front of the towering vessel and opens its coffin-box body to reveal the complicated innards. He pushes the pendulum back and forth. He yanks on the weights. Without the key, its full-moon face and delicate arms remain motionless.

My dad worries that losing the key proves that the neurologist's foreboding diagnosis is correct. He pulls at his shock-white hair that always stands on end and turns over every drawer. He takes apart the

refrigerator as objects sometimes turn up lodged between the milk and mayonnaise. He sifts through the vacuum bag until his fingertips are ashen with dust. My father believes that if he can find this clock key, he can prove his neurologist wrong once and for all.

"Where is that damn key," my dad muses, sipping his martini on a stifling hot Tuesday night. In his retirement, he says, every evening feels like a Saturday night. "I never lose important things."

I don't remind him that his misplaced house keys turned up between the dewy heads of broccoli in the grocery produce section yesterday, or that I found his insurance card last week tucked inside the value-size box of Frosted Flakes.

I try to reassure my dad. "You don't need it."

The kitchen timer's ding interrupts us. "What the hell?"

"It's the reminder bell to change your medication patch."

He's just as surprised as he was 24 hours ago as he shuffles to the kitchen for something he cannot remember. He returns with another martini.

Later, after my father has fallen asleep in his chair with the TV's volume set on blow-your-hair-back, I lounge outside by the retirement community's glowing pool. The cloudless night hosts a near full moon and I let the summer's humidity and heavy heat blanket me. Noise from the televisions in

every unit combine to a low rumble. Alone, finally, I pull the object from my pocket that's been gnashing into my hip all day.

I found the clock key jammed inside the garbage disposal. My long fingers reached into the carriage beneath the rubber stopper and pulled up the metal culprit: a terribly mangled and distorted grandfather clock key with its distinctive three leaf clover shaped head. The moment I found it, I knew I would keep it forever—a hard physical reminder of what happened during the long forgetting.

In a few days, I will drive my father to his neurology appointment while we practice random questions as if we are on the game show *Jeopardy*. “Who is the president of the United States?” I will quiz him. “How many hours in one day? What county do you live in? What is your middle name? What years were your children born?” He will stumble on the answers but shine with my encouragement until he sees the inside of the examination room. There, sitting on the padded table with a blood pressure arm cuff buzzing tight, he will tell the doctor that the president of the United States is

Osama Bin Laden and that despite the blazing heat, Christmas is only days away. The doctor will nod, as is his way, and ask how the new memory patch medication is working.

“Great,” my father will chirp. “Never been better.”

The doctor will hand him a blank sheet of paper and a pen. “That’s wonderful news. Could you draw me a clock? A face that reads 4:00.”

I will watch as my father draws an oblong circular shape and struggle to mark the hour points. The doctor’s eyes will warn me not to help as my father produces some sort of clock that looks like it came from the untrained hands of a preschooler.

At the pool’s side and drenched in South Carolina moonlight, I silently cry. My tears aren’t because in a few days’ time my father will forget he lost the key or that he even owned a grandfather clock. My tears are because I won’t be able to forget him winding those delicately curled edges of the hour and minute hands backwards, as if it were that easy.



**Author’s statement:** *South Carolina, 2012* began with a writing prompt from NPR’s Three-Minute Fiction contest. I assigned it to my students and joined them in the writing challenge. The piece soon turned into a nonfiction flash about my father. I’d recently spent two weeks at my father’s home where I came to understand the gravity of his early onset Alzheimer’s. I’d been in denial about the severity of my father’s diagnosis, and instances like the ones described in the flash brought me face-to-face with a disease I was completely unprepared to deal with. My father passed away in the Spring of 2014.

*Meredith Doench (meredithdoench.com, @MeredithDoench) teaches writing at the University of Dayton and is the author of the Luce Hansen Thriller Series, which features the novels Crossed, Forsaken Trust, and Deadeye.*