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Bad News

by Fran Duffield

Nothing travels faster than the speed of light with the possible exception of bad news, which obeys its own special laws. It was a slowly brightening morning, and the child was aware of the brightness even with closed eyes. The light crept across the dusty surfaces of the pictures and ornaments, the worn blue velvet of the battered Edwardian chairs and the chaise longue where her holiday bed was made up.

She had stirred when the front door had clicked but had sunk back into the untroubled waters of her sleep. The rustle of the heavy folds of the sheets was comforting, all part of staying with her grandparents. In the distant kitchen, crocks clinked and water ran in the sink. The sunray clock crept imperceptibly past eight o'clock.

Unseen by anyone, the light now streaming through the stained glass of the front door was blocked out by a dark shape, the outline rippling uncertainly in the obscure glass. The clear shape of a hand emerged from the blur and pressed the bell that didn't work. Another shape hovered behind the first. A pause, and then a sharp rapid knocking at the glass. The shadow cast on the turkey runner shifted uneasily.

The crocks stopped clattering and her grandmother's slippers shuffled over the creaking floorboard in the hall, past the silent phone and the vase of flowers from the garden. A few petals and a scatter of pollen skittered across the walnut table in the draught as the front door was opened.

A man's voice, deep but stumbling and hesitant: the only audible words 'bad news'. A terrible 'Oh' in her grandmother's voice, urgent questions, another man's voice, lighter, calmer, kindly.

The child lay very still, waiting, listening. Her grandmother's voice: 'the child': the lighter voice said he would fetch the neighbour. There were quick footsteps, rustling of coats, the whirr and click of her grandmother dialling a phone number. "Mary? She's fine, but I have some bad news" Her low voice was shaking. The child was trembling too. Feeling without understanding, she felt as if her bad dream of falling downstairs had failed to stop before she hit the bottom.

The loose door handle rattled, and the child closed her eyes, as if the hands on the clock could go back to two minutes before eight. "Bless her, she's still asleep," the neighbour whispered, "you go, her mother will be here in a minute."

The sunray clock's minute hand juddered silently to ten past eight. Bad news travels fast to the heart.