Winter 3-1-1994

Ended But Unfinished

Virginia Dvorak
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.cod.edu/plr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol13/iss1/60
**Ended But Unfinished**  
*by Virginia Dvorak*

She heard the clock strike seven; the old familiar soft chime reminded her that each day it was time to get up. She remembered buying the clock. She only paid one hundred dollars for it, and at that time she could not really afford it. She had hesitated with the purchase, even though the price was only a fraction of its value. A customer who owed her money had offered it to her when her father was closing out his bankrupt furniture store. It was a beautiful grandfather clock, with good solid wood, hand rubbed to a soft satiny finish. For over thirty years, it had sweetly chimed every fifteen minutes, a constant reminder of life’s swift passage.

But she had to get up. Her granddaughter had a school bus to catch. She never awakened easily and she was always sluggish in the morning. She was a night person, staying up into the early morning hours on one pretext or another. She liked to look out at all the dark windows and realize she was the last person awake each night. She had always hated to waste time sleeping, there were so many things she wanted to do. She needed only five to six hours sleep each night and slept soundly, without dreaming, never hearing a storm’s thunder and wind.

Enough of these aimless thoughts. She must get up. Though she intended to rise, her body continued to lie still in the bed. “I must be half asleep” she reasoned, “I’ll just rest a few more minutes.” So she relaxed, feeling completely detached like a floating speck on the ceiling, weightless as a feather.

When the clock struck the quarter hour, she roused again. There were no sounds from her granddaughter’s room, and the bus was due in one half hour. If the teenager was not ready, the driver honked loudly outside the condo window. It was terribly embarrassing to call out to him from the second floor. But again, though she willed herself to rise, her body failed to move. Strangely unconcerned, she allowed herself to drift off again like an aimless cloud in the sky.

Once more the clock faithfully performed its job and chimed at the half hour, eight soft notes, still gently, but more insistent than the four notes designating the quarter hour. Now she knew she must get up at once, she could still call the bus and direct the driver not to come, thus avoiding his loud honking. But again, it was still impossible to move, and she finally realized something was wrong. She could not move; in fact, she felt absent, as if she were not even in the bed.

She tried to call out to awaken her granddaughter, but there was no sound. Somehow, the inability to move and to speak did not particularly concern her. She continued to lie still in the darkened room with its drawn shades. Shortly, the clock tried once more with its pretty tune, twelve notes for the three-quarter hour, and once again she willed her muscles to move, but none obeyed. A few minutes later the bus honked, and she heard her granddaughter finally get up. After the bus left, the teenager came into her bedroom and demanded, “Why didn’t you get me up?”

But she was unable to answer; her granddaughter shook her roughly, but she felt nothing, and the child ran to the phone calling the school to send a late bus.
In another minute the shower was running, and she was frantically getting ready for school. The teenager, naturally, was only concerned with herself and merely thought her grandmother was too sleepy to get up, not reasoning that in all the years they had spent together nothing like this had ever happened.

So when the late bus arrived and honked, the granddaughter went down the stairs with a loud good-bye. The condo was quiet again. The grandmother was neither thinking nor dreaming; she lay quietly, feeling neither bad nor good, vaguely remembering how years before she had trained herself to pretend she was in the farthest corner of the room when her dentist was ready to pull a tooth. Then as she counted the tiles bordering the wall, the tooth was out, almost without her realizing it. So now, she had the same detached sensation, as if she had removed herself from her own body and was watching it from above, and it had no meaning or connection to her.

Vaguely, she realized she had left many things unfinished; her papers were not in order. She had intended to update her affairs, designating measures to be carried out when she was gone, but she had not finished the list. Nothing was truly done, and she was not ready to stop, but it seemed she had stopped before she was ready. Oddly, she no longer cared. Whatever was undone, someone else could do. It was no longer her job or her duty to carry on. Others could handle whatever was necessary, and it did not disturb her that they might not carry out her wishes.

She knew, somehow, her life had ended peacefully and painlessly. It was done, whether or not she judged she had finished. But she felt neither sorrow nor joy, regret nor exhilaration. She was nothing and content to be, leaving behind forever the shackles and failures of life and above all, the driving need to try and right wrongs, correct mistakes, and help those who could not help themselves. It was fine to float light as a feather with nowhere to go and nothing to do forever. It didn’t even matter that she never had time to say good-bye.

The clock, always carrying out its job, struck once more. Twelve strokes with their gentle tune. The hour ended with eight melodic chimes, then an echoing silence. A fitting final farewell for the empty body on the bed.